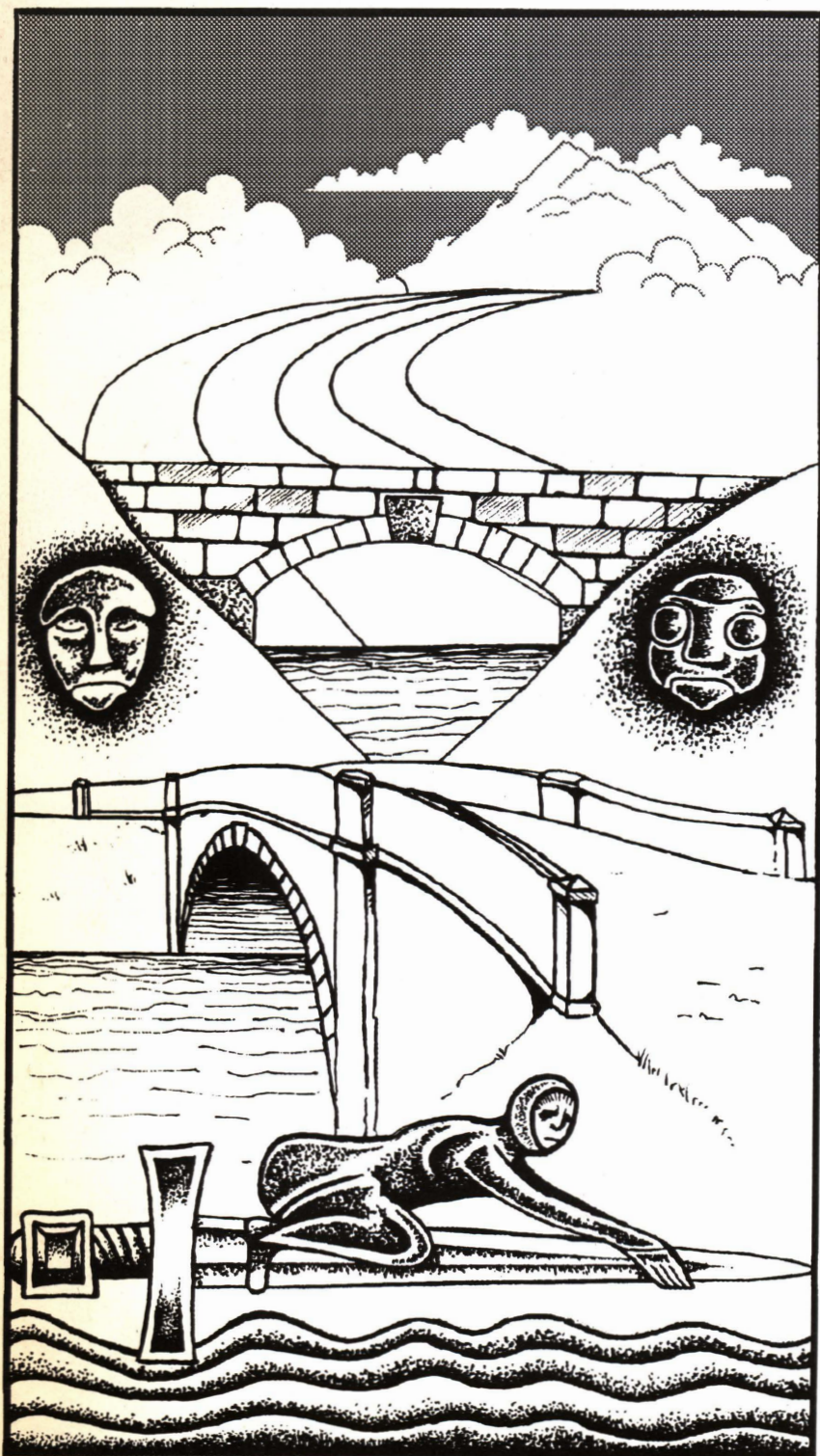


AT THE EDGE

No.1 March 1996

£ 2.00



FIRST ISSUE

Otherworld Cattle

The Perilous
Bridge

TIME & PLACE -
the TV of our
minds

Under the
Greenwood Tree

THE WISE MEN
OF GOTHAM

Exploring
Past and Place

ANCIENT
TAPLOW

FOGS
brings stones out
of the mist

AT THE EDGE

Exploring new
interpretations of
past and place in
archaeology, folklore
and mythology

Issue No.1 March 1996

Contents:

<i>Hilda Ellis Davidson</i> Otherworld Cattle	2
<i>Alby Stone</i> The Perilous Bridge	7
<i>Anthony Weir</i> Time and Place: the TV of our Minds	11
<i>Jeremy Harte</i> Under the Greenwood Tree	15
<i>Frank E. Earp</i> The Wise Men of Gotham	20
<i>R.A. Stevens</i> Gotham, Sussex	25
<i>Bob Trubshaw</i> Exploring Past and Place	26
<i>Rowan</i> White Dragon keeps EM alive in Midlands	30
<i>Eric Fitch</i> Ancient Taplow	32
<i>Marian Nagahiro</i> FOGS brings stones out of the mist	36
ABSTRACTS	38
REVIEWS	41

Cover:

The Perilous Bridge

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What of the future? We have not fired all our best shots in the first issue!

Forthcoming in future issues of **AT THE EDGE**

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Oxhide tales

Jeremy Harte
Churches moved by night

Anne Ross
Bog burials

Gavin Smith
**A religious paradigm for
some English place-name
elements**

Alby Stone
A pagan Gothic ritual

Plus abstracts, reviews and many other ideas which have yet to be finalised.

If you do not already subscribe to *At the Edge* then please consider taking out a subscription. Even better, encourage everyone you meet to do so too.

We aim to keep the cover price down but this does mean that the shoe-string budget can get badly frayed. It really is true to say that every new subscription helps!

Given the incessant increases in paper costs I do not expect the subscription rate of £7.00 to hold for much longer - please regard this as a 'special introductory offer'. The only way I can defer an imminent increase is for new subscribers to come flooding in!

HELLO!

And welcome to the first issue of **AT THE EDGE**.

This is neither a heavyweight academic periodical or from the fanciful fringe. *At the Edge* is intended to be a unique magazine 'walking on the cracks' between disciplines and providing accessible insights for all with an interest in the latest and most innovative ideas about past and place.

It is no coincidence that the cover illustration of this first issue relates to Alby Stone's article on 'The Perilous Bridge'. *At the Edge* is itself 'liminal' in its scope and will be attempting to establish bridges - perilous or otherwise - between the subjects which fall broadly into the scope of archaeology, folklore and mythology.

A great deal of encouragement and practical help has been received during the preparation of this inaugural issue. Special thanks are due to all the authors and illustrators, who have responded exceptionally well to my various requests. I am equally grateful to the various 'behind the scenes' collaborators who have helped with design, publicity and kindred matters. To name names risks causing offence by inadvertently omitting someone so, suffice to say, if the cap fits please consider yourself well and truly thanked.

What of the future? We have not fired all our best shots in the first issue, as the list of contents for the forthcoming issues reveals. Some ideas on where my own interests fall can be found in the 'Exploring past and place' article on page 26. However, the input of other contributors will be the main determinant of the future emphasis. My only expectation is that *At the Edge* will steadily evolve as the issues mount up - but I do not have any fixed or firm ideas on how. *At the Edge* might be capable of 'cross-fertilising' ideas from different disciplines and

backgrounds - who knows what hybrids might emerge?

A high proportion of the current subscribers will have transferred from my previous attempt at editorship, the regionally-based magazine *Mercian Mysteries*. Hopefully, you will all consider that *At the Edge* is an improvement in both appearance and content. Nevertheless, the absence of Midlands-related information may be felt as a loss. If this is the case, then please turn to page 30 where Rowan of *White Dragon* explains how this gap is to be bridged.

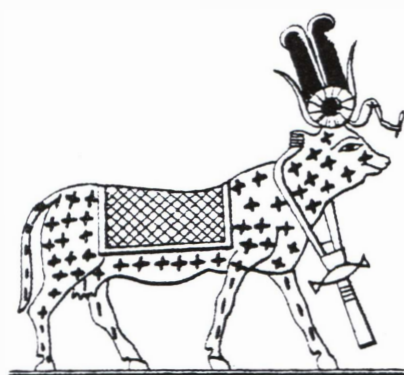
Unlike *Mercian Mysteries*, *At the Edge* does not aim to be an 'earth mysteries' magazine. *The Ley Hunter* already offers excellent national, indeed international, coverage of this domain, along with a number of regional magazines, such as *Meyn Mamvro* and the long-established *Northern Earth*. Rather, *At the Edge* includes in its scope some of the rag-bag of topics which make up earth 'mysteries', but this will not be the focus of the content. The metaphor embedded in the title *At the Edge* can be interpreted at several levels, but my main intention was to look both at the edges of academe, where innovative ideas are emerging despite the inhibitions of peer-review and career-building, and at the activities of 'part-time' non-professionals who are honing a cutting edge of exciting insights based on solid research. It is unfortunate that the scope of *At the Edge* needs to be defined more by what it is not, rather than by a 'positive' term of reference. Perhaps this is the inevitable nature of attempting to transgress borderlines and explore liminal zones.

I hope you enjoy this issue and, if necessary, take out a subscription to *At the Edge*.

Otherworld

Few folklorists and or those interested in early religion pay much serious attention to the cow. This is a pity, since the symbol of cattle and of the milk they provide has been enormously important in the past, particularly in the cults of goddesses. In Ancient Egypt the first sacred cows were the wild ones in the Delta marshes, a symbol of abundant life and regarded as creatures of the Otherworld. Later the sky itself was depicted as a great cow, her belly speckled with stars, identified with the goddess Hathor, who each dawn gave birth to the sun, the young bull-calf. By the eleventh dynasty cows with a special patterned hide were regarded as incarnations of Hathor, and at Memphis there was a special white cow which represented her. The milk of the cows kept in Hathor's temple was a link between the Pharaohs and the gods, for royal babies were fed on it, and it was Hathor's milk which was said to restore the dead Pharaoh to new life in the Otherworld. Again in Mesopotamia the powerful goddess Ninkhursag presided over a temple dairy, providing milk for royal children.

Among the Greeks there were evidently cattle sacred to Hyperion, the sun-god, since in Homer we find Odysseus warning his men against slaughtering any beast from his seven herds for food, and they paid dearly for their



disobedience. These are Otherworld cattle, said in Book XII of the *Odyssey* not to be subject to natural death. Thus the idea of special cattle, associated with the Otherworld, was a familiar one. They might be singled out by unusual colouring, or because they were larger and finer than normal animals, or they might belong to a special herd. In India today goddesses are often described as cows, and milk and milk products offered to the gods.

Similar ideas, though of a less exalted nature, can be traced in northern Europe, and were apparently familiar to the Indo-Europeans. They have left traces in our popular traditions and folklore, particularly in the British Isles and Scandinavia, where dairy-farming and the making of butter and other milk products has for centuries played a major part in people's lives: they provided an essential part of the diet as well as rich food for pleasurable eating. The position was different in southern Europe:

in areas around the Mediterranean there was little good grazing land, and the warmer climate made it difficult to transport fresh milk to the towns, while olive oil was available to replace butter. The Romans regarded milk as fit only for infants and invalids, although cheese was made on the farms and was regularly supplied to the army.

Consequently the Roman fertility goddesses took little interest in milk, and are not associated with the dairy. In northern Europe, however, this was closely linked with the goddesses, although this has tended to go unrecognized. There is a striking carving of the goddess Rosinerta, for instance, on an altar found at Housesteads on the Roman Wall (see illustration overleaf), where she seems undoubtedly to be working with her plunger turning milk into butter. The object beside her is very similar to the wooden churn with iron hoops still used on farms in northern England at the beginning of this century.

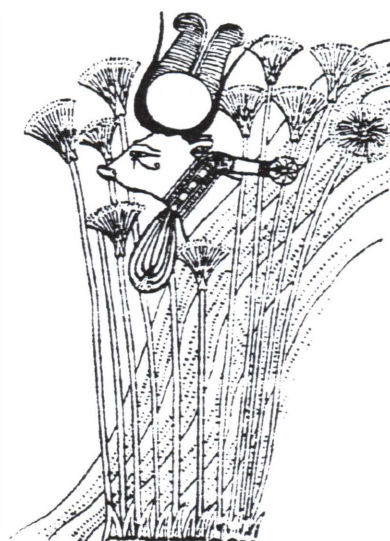
We need to realize the tremendous importance of milk and butter in earlier times and the way in which it influenced customs and legends. There was good grazing land in the Midlands, and memories of Otherworld cattle certainly exist there if we take the trouble to look for them. Nowadays milk comes in the bottle or the

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be able to start the first issue of At the Edge with this article by HILDA ELLIS DAVIDSON. Her support and encouragement have been most appreciated during the recent months of preparation for the launch.

cattle

carton all the year round, and we have no idea of the excitement and eagerness with which people greeted the coming of summer, after the austerities of winter and Lent. By May the calves, who had taken all the milk, were at last separated from their mothers, and milk and cream were available again. In Tudor times the young people paired off in the surrounding woods on the evening before May Day, a custom regarded as scandalous by the Puritans, although in fact it often resulted in respectable betrothals and was not disapproved of by their families. We know from some Elizabethan plays that on May morning it was customary for the couples to visit nearby farms and feast on such delicacies as milk laced with rum, syllabubs (for which the cow was milked directly into wine, port or sherry), sour milk and curds with cream and sugar, junkets, and cream cakes.

In areas where the cattle were moved up to summer pastures at the end of April, as happened in Scandinavia and parts of the British Isles, this too marked the beginning of summer and was something to look forward to with excitement. A number of the farm workers moved out with the cattle, and were away all summer, working hard to provide supplies of butter for the winter ahead, and making their own amusements and pastimes in their spare time. A Norwegian folklorist, Svale



Solheim, has produced a fascinating book on the rich traditions and legends associated with the move to the *saetter*, the place where the summer months would be spent. He has many stories collected from individuals whose families regularly took part in these migrations, including tales of Otherworld cattle belonging to the 'underearth' people, who are not unlike our fairy folk.

Part of the rich lore associated with work in the dairy was due to another factor which we now tend to forget: the extreme difficulty of obtaining butter in the old upright plunger churn. The workers did not always keep their dairy equipment scrupulously clean, and it was all too easy for things to go wrong, so that there are countless tales of witchcraft practised by some

malicious neighbour which prevented the butter from coming. The folklore archives in Dublin have many tales of the dangers of May Day, the time when the cream might be stolen by witchcraft. Various methods were practised, such as taking the froth from a river at the point where two or three streams met, uttering such words as 'All for myself and nothing for the rest of them', crossing the boundary of a neighbour's farm to gather the dew and sweeping it up with the spangle used to secure the cow's legs while milking, or taking the first water of the day from a well on a neighbour's farm. There is no doubt that such practices were actually tried out, and people who were seen on May morning going about their lawful occasions might well be accused of such crimes. There are many legends too of women taking on the shape of hares in order to steal milk or prevent the production of butter.

If we can think ourselves back into such a background, remembering that passions might run high when the prosperity and perhaps the very survival of a family depended on the successful production of butter and cream, then the legends of Otherworld cows become more understandable. Solheim's exhaustive study from Norway includes numbers of rituals, spells, prayers, and 'lucky' practices to obtain milk and butter. These went on from the time when they fixed a good day for the move to the mountains, and made the journey with the cows, overjoyed to be released from their dark sheds after the long winter, and continued until they returned to the home farm. The spells and practices which they used are a mixture of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, some of them undoubtedly very old. In the woods and mountain pastures where the men and children looked after the cattle during the day, while the women worked in the dairy,



Rosmerta and her churn.
A Romano-British stone bas-relief sculpture from Housesteads.
Drawing by Norman Fahy.

they were very conscious of the supernatural folk who might sometimes be encountered, and felt it was essential to keep on good terms with them as far as possible.

For example, they might stop by a great stone which they passed on their route to the pastures and greet the dweller there by name, perhaps making small offerings like a little milk from the leading cow released on to the ground, or buttermilk poured on to small knolls or into holes in the earth. They encouraged insects and small creatures

such as mice or harmless snakes because they were good omens for the welfare of the cattle, while they cut crosses or what seem to be ancient sun symbols on the vessels in which the milk was collected, or put yellow flowers such as buttercups or marigolds into them to increase the yield of butter.

Tales have been recorded from women who had heard them from some older member of the family such as mother or grandmother, indicating a widespread belief in Otherworld cattle. For instance, a dairymaid might be approached by a strange woman and asked whether she would do the milking

for her that evening, to enable her to attend a funeral, or perhaps go to a feast. The girl asks where the herd can be found, and is told that they are close at hand, and that vessels will be put out ready for the milking. The cows, she discovers, are very fine animals, the kind every farmer would long to possess, and as a reward for her help, the dairymaid may be offered one of them, which becomes a family treasure. If she is foolish enough to refuse, because she is afraid of dealings with 'underearth' people, the woman will call it back, and it disappears with the rest.

Such animals might also be seen wandering in the forest, but if any attempt were made to take possession of them or milk them, they would vanish. However one method of obtaining them was to throw steel over them. There is a Swedish tale of a girl who saw a strange cow in her herd, and flung her sewing at it to drive it back home. Her steel needle was in the sewing, however, and the supernatural woman who owned the cow then appeared, lamenting that now she could not take the animal back, and asking if the girl would give her a lamb or a good neckcloth in return. Both Norwegian and Swedish women claimed to have heard the supernatural owners of the cattle calling their beasts home in the evening, and quoted their calling songs in which they summoned their cows by name.

The colour of these Otherworld cattle is often described, but this varies in different districts, and Solheim thought this might be due to new unfamiliar strains being introduced which seemed exotic to those who encountered them. Occasionally bulls from the Otherworld herds were thought to mate with ordinary cows, and the resulting calves would usually be fine animals, although there were some cases reported of misshapen or tailless beasts as the offspring of such unions.

Fairy cows may also be found in Irish tradition. One such cow

nourished St Brigid as an infant, the legendary Abbess of Kildare, who seems to have inherited pre-Christian traditions of the goddess Brigit. The saint was closely associated with cattle and milk. Her mother worked as a dairymaid, and her daughter was said to be born as she stepped across the threshold on her way back from the dairy, carrying a vessel of milk. The baby could not thrive on ordinary cow's milk, so her foster-father, skilled in magical lore, procured an Otherworld cow, a white animal with red ears, for her. Brigid may be seen pictured in churches with her cow, said to accompany her on her visits to farms on the eve of her festival, when a sheaf of hay might be left out for it. White cattle with red ears were also possessed by that impressive figure the Hag of Beware, thought to have once been a powerful local divinity.

Cattle of this type certainly existed in England from Roman times, and one herd of such beasts, kept isolated for centuries, still survives at Chillingham in Northumberland. Whitehead, who made a special study of them, is disposed to accept the theory that they are descended from white cattle brought in by the Romans for processions and sacrificial ceremonies, since the native British cattle were mostly black; this might account for their association with the supernatural world.

In Wales supernatural cattle are said to come from a fairy realm beneath the water of certain lakes. The best known tale is that of the fairy bride who makes a marriage with a farmer, but returns to the lake when certain conditions are broken - often unwittingly - by her husband. She brings her herd of wonderful cattle out of the lake with her, and calls them back into the water when she leaves for good. The lady of Llyn y Fan Fach in Dyfed is said to have left descendants who were famous physicians. The tale was not recorded in print until 1861, but it was known to a number of informants, and included a calling song like those from Norway and

Sweden, when the mistress of the supernatural cattle summoned each in turn by name.

Such calling songs must have been used in England, and I should be most grateful to anyone who can give me information about them. The nineteenth century poet Jean Ingelow brought a romanticized version of such a song into her poem 'The High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire':

*From the clovers lift your head;
Come uppe Whitefoot, come uppe
Lightfoot,
Come uppe Jetty, rise and follow
Jetty, to the milking shed.*

However I have been unable to find any songs of her own time which might have inspired the verses.

In England we find a widespread tradition in the midlands and the north of bountiful cows of special beauty, yielding large quantities of milk, who come from the Otherworld and allow people to milk them until the greed or cruelty of certain individuals drives them away. The most famous example is that of Mitchell's Fold in south Shropshire, which was carefully recorded by Charlotte Burne, who found that in the 1880s many people in the neighbourhood were familiar with the legend. It was said that in a time of famine a beautiful white cow appeared, and anyone might come and milk her, providing only one vessel was brought; this would be filled, whatever its size and shape. All went well until a mean old witch brought along a sieve, and milked the cow dry. Various versions of this tale are found in many areas in Shropshire and further north, and in some places large bones have been produced as proof of the story. Sometimes the cow died, sometimes she vanished after stamping her foot in rage and leaving a mark on a rock. In Warwickshire she was said to turn into a destructive animal, the Dun Cow, finally slain by Guy of Warwick. There is also a variant of this legend from Wales, telling how a white cow travelled widely, leaving calves in many places from which later cows were said to be

descended, until at last people in the Vale of Towry wanted to kill her, and she vanished. The site at Mitchell's Fold where the cow was said to have appeared is some distance from any habitation, marked by a ring of standing stones, now incomplete, and there are other stone circles recorded not far away. There is an impressive view of hills on every side, and the place would form a suitable centre for people from surrounding villages.

The concept of an Otherworld cow who brings benefits is found in India, where Gabrielle Ferro-Luzzi collected over 400 legends about the self-milking cow. The basic tale was about a mysterious cow which emptied its udder regularly over an anthill or cairn, beneath which was afterwards discovered a sacred lingam or the image of a god, whereupon the local rajah built a temple to hold the divine symbol. The writer's main interest was in the different ways in which a tradition might develop, but her material also shows how the cow can be a symbol of divine bounty.

A parallel from England can be found in a strange legend of St Kenelm told in a fourteenth century poem from the collection in the *Southern English Legendary*. Here Kenelm was a boy-king murdered by his wicked sister. His body was not found until at last a white cow belonging to a widow was observed to spend the whole day in a certain valley, away from the rest of the herd. The cow took no food, but remained 'fair and round', while its yield of milk was greater than all the others. As result of this, together with a letter in English miraculously delivered to the Pope, the body of the child martyr was discovered. There are other legends of cows or oxen which reveal where a saint shall be buried or a church built, by refusing to stop except on one particular site. The attractive Norfolk saint, St Wistan, said to be a king's son who worked as a farm labourer,

was drawn to Bawburgh after death by two bullocks which he had reared. They miraculously crossed a river, and created two healing wells where they stopped to piss on the way. Walston is shown on a roodscreen in the church at Barnham Broom with the two animals at his feet.

Several northern divinities also possessed oxen, used for ploughing. The Celtic goddess Brigit had two, who gave her warning of cattle-stealing anywhere in Ireland, while the Danish goddess Gefion, a powerful character, used oxen to plough round a tract of land in Sweden which became the island of Zealand. In Wales the Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach called her oxen back into the lake with the cows, and the marks of the plough they had been drawing were said to be visible for six miles.

Indeed in Norse mythology there is one account of the creation of the world beginning from a primeval cow, whose name Audhumla is thought to mean 'Rich, hornless cow'. She

existed before the gods along with the giant Ymir, whom she nourished, and she licked the primeval ice-blocks until a being called Buri emerged, from whom the gods were descended. Some think that this is an Indo-European origin myth, and whether this is so or not, it reminds us once again of the great and holy significance of the cow for our ancestors in the North. It is sad to think that this is something now wholly lost, with robot milking, commercialism of dairy farming on a huge scale, and the tendency to regard the cow as nothing more than a machine to yield milk, condemned to a short and not particularly happy life. I set out to find out more about Otherworld cattle because of the importance milk possessed in the cults of the northern goddesses, but soon found they were worthy of investigation in their own right. I commend the study of cattle legends to readers of *At the Edge* as a part of their own heritage, and I shall be very glad to hear of any relevant local traditions.

Further reading:

C. Phythian-Adams: 'Milk and Soot' in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), London 1983.

P. Lysaght: 'Beltaine' in *Boundaries and Thresholds* H.R.E. Davidson (ed.), Stroud 1992.

K.D. Whitehead: *The Ancient White Cattle of Britain*, London 1953.

J. Wood: 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales' *Folklore* 103, 55-72, 1992.

G.E. Ferro-Luzzi: *The Self-Milking Cow and the Bleeding Lingam*, Wiesbaden, 1987.

Editor's footnote

Thanks are due to Alby Stone for picture research. The illustration on page 2 depicts Hathor as the star-spangled Heaven-Cow. On page 3 Hathor appears as Queen of the Underworld appearing out of the funerary mountain of Western Thebes. Special thanks to Norman Fahy for preparing the illustration of Rosmerta at short notice.

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The Perilous Bridge

ALBY STONE is a prolific writer of articles on northern traditional beliefs and Arthurian legends. He has also written a number of booklets: *Wyrd*: fate and destiny in north European tradition; *A splendid pillar*; *The bleeding lance* and *The questing beast*. His book on northern creation mythologies, *Ymir's flesh*, is scheduled to be published this summer.

*Earth has not anything to show
more fair:
Dull would be he of soul who
could pass by
A sight so touching in its
majesty:
This city now doth, like a
garment, wear
The beauty of the morning;
silent bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres,
and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the
sky;
All bright and glittering in the
smokeless air.*

So wrote William Wordsworth in his famous poem *Upon Westminster Bridge*. This crystallises a timeless moment in which the mundane is transmuted into the magical: the city evoked by the poet's words is a far cry from the grubby, noisy, tumultuous place that London has ever been, transformed by the hour and Wordsworth's vision into a still, mystical realm in harmony with nature, at peace with itself.

Bridges have this effect on the perceptive soul. It does not really matter whether Wordsworth penned his lines while actually standing upon the bridge, or was simply inspired to write them while walking across it - or, for that matter, if he just imagined that he was there while he was composing the poem. The important thing here is the symbolism: the bridge, and the enchanted world it brings to the poet's mind.

The very nature of a bridge dictates its symbolic use. It is a structure that joins two

otherwise separate pieces of land, yet at the same time enhances their separateness. One can travel across it, from one land mass to another, but while on it the traveller is neither in one place nor the other. A bridge is a quintessentially liminal thing, and it shares those qualities that characterise other things that delimit one state from another - doors, boundaries, the turning point of one day or year to the next - by being dangerous, enchanted, pregnant with a double-edged potential. In his poem *The Bridge*, H.W. Longfellow marries the liminal object with a kindred point in time:

*I stood upon the bridge at
midnight,
As the clocks were striking the
hour.*

This place between places is also a place between times [1]. Otherwise responsible adults have been known to revert to a childhood state while on a bridge, feeling free to play the game of Pooh Sticks made popular by the children's books of A.A. Milne. Normally sane and sober men and women will happily indulge in infantile games when they encounter a bridge. Obviously it was Milne who prepared the way; but it is the bridge that is the trigger, and there everyday social rôles and behaviour are suspended.

In cosmological myth, bridges sometimes lead from the realm of mortals to the land of the dead, or to the abode of the gods. Zoroastrian myth tells

of the Cinvat ('separation') bridge, 'the holy bridge made by Mazda' that stretches over hell to paradise, 'which is the route of every one, righteous or wicked; the width across the route of the righteous is a breadth of nine spears, each one the length of three reeds, but the route for the wicked becomes like the edge of a razor' [2]. The bridge is suspended between two mountains, one in the centre of the world, one at the rim. This serves to reinforce the liminal bridge's status, by linking the range of mountains believed to encircle the earth, that which separates the outside from the inside, with that of the *axis mundi*, which keeps earth and sky apart. Similar bridges occur in the traditions of the Ossetes, Armenians, and Georgians; and the bridge *al-Sirat* ('the path') of Islamic tradition is almost certainly derived from Zoroastrian cosmology.

The Cinvat bridge is analogous to that crossed by the Altaic shaman in the spirit-journey to the underworld realm of Erlik Khan. This bridge is as wide as a hair, and the sea below it is strewn with the bones of shamans who have failed the crossing - like the Cinvat, this bridge will not tolerate a sinner [3]. A variation on this motif occurs in North American native myth: the Telummi Yokuts believe that the land of the dead is reached by crossing a stream by way of a shaking bridge that the living cannot



use [4]. In the same vein are the sword-bridge that features in a number of Arthurian romances, and the *pont où nul ne passe* described in a continuation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*. The last is only half a bridge, but when the hero reaches the middle it swings about so that the end that formerly rested on one side now leads to the other [5]. The Arthurian bridges do not lead to the underworld, strictly speaking, but to an otherworld of sorts - deeper into the enchanted land of adventure. The road to the land of the dead is said to lead across a bridge in many other traditions. The Semang of Malaysia have a bridge called *Balan Bacham* that reaches across the sea to the magical island of Belet; also in Malaysia, the Sakai tell of a bridge named *Menteg* that spans a cauldron of boiling water, into which the wicked fall [6]. For the Moso of southwest China, the otherworld is reached by a bridge blockaded by demons [7].

The Norse myth of Baldr's death tells of Hermóðr's ride to the land of Hel on Odin's steed Sleipnir; on the way he crosses the *Gjallar brú*, the gold-roofed 'echoing bridge' over the river Gjoll. Saxo Grammaticus gives the story of Hadingus, who is taken on a journey to the underworld by a mysterious woman; on the road they cross a bridge over a river strewn with weapons [8]. Saxo also tells of a river that separates the world of men from a supernatural realm inhabited by monsters, spanned by a golden bridge forbidden to travellers [9]; and the paradisa-

land *Odainsakr* of *Eiríks Saga Viðforla* is reached via a stone bridge [10]. The most famous bridge in Norse myth is *Bifrost*, the 'trembling way' that is popularly identified with the rainbow. Bifrost stretches from *Miðgarðr* to *Asgarðr*, terminating at *Himinbjorg*, the home of its watchman *Heimdallr* [11].

Bridges, like all crossing places, are dangerous. As routes across the body of water that separates the living from the dead, or across the infernal abyss, these mythical bridges are especially dangerous: the soul of the sinner cannot cross, and the bridge distinguishes between the righteous and the damned. Earthly bridges are fixed structures, but these are narrow or broad, as occasion demands, or are endowed with an apparent structural unsoundness that allows only the morally resolute to make the crossing in safety. Sometimes, the danger is there for all, and for the righteous the bridge is a final test. Invariably, the bridge leads to a kind of paradise or to an underworld that will not tolerate the presence of the bad, who fall from it into a place of dissolution or punishment.

The association of bridges with death and testing persists into the present day. It is a symbolic state that has been used to good effect in the cinema. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), while largely based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, often departs into mythological territory. One spectacular scene is set at a bridge where the Viet Cong are

locked in a stalemate with US troops. The structure is rebuilt every day, and destroyed at night; its American defenders move and act as if they are already dead. The whole scene is spectral and eerie, imbued with a depressing sense of futility and fatalism that neatly encapsulates the war in Vietnam, and also suggests the timelessness that is a property of all liminal places. The undoing of the day's labour at night-time is a common motif in folklore; and appropriately enough, the notion of repetitive, futile labour is often represented metaphorically as 'painting the Forth Bridge' - the worker completes a particularly laborious and time-consuming task, then has to do it all over again from the very beginning.

Unlike the bridge of *Apocalypse Now*, in which the enemy forces are as invisible as ghosts, that of *A Bridge Too Far* (directed by Richard Attenborough, 1977), based on the book by Cornelius Ryan, which tells the story of the Allied defeat at Arnhem in 1944, is a straightforward symbol of the common ground that both links and divides the combatants. In the film of Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge At San Luis Rey* (Rowland V. Lee, 1944), the tenuous links between five very different people are symbolised by the Peruvian rope-bridge that collapses beneath them. A German film, *The Bridge* (Bernhard Wicki, 1959), uses the bridge as a metaphor for the transition from childhood to adulthood, when only a group of 16-year-old boys are left to defend a town from the Allied forces in 1945.

More complex is David Lean's famous 1957 adaptation of Pierre Boulle's novel *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, in which British prisoners of war

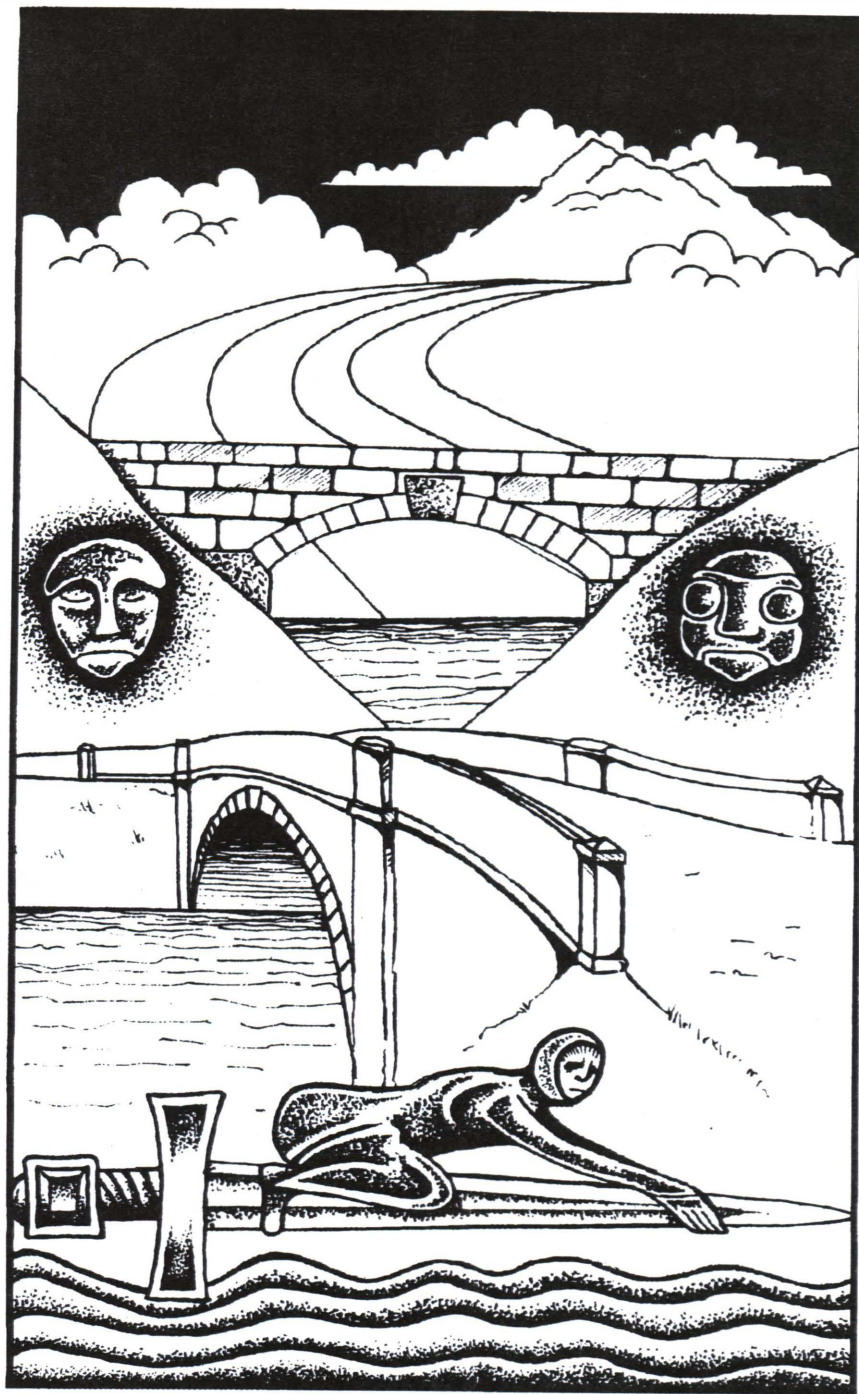
are set to work building a bridge for the Japanese invaders. The magnificent performance of Alec Guinness, as the Colonel who is at first resistant to the Japanese demands, and then tries to prevent the bridge's destruction, tends to distract the viewer from the symbolic purpose of the bridge itself: it is, once again, a structure that both unites and divides the two warring sides; but it is also the Colonel's own personal metaphor, a way of reconciling captivity with freedom of spirit, duty with loss of purpose. It is also the object whose construction leads, inexorably and tragically, to his death.

These cinematic examples - there are many more, often adaptations from modern literature - serve to illustrate the abiding symbolism of the bridge, and demonstrate that its archaic cosmological import is embedded in our collective consciousness. It is ironic that a structure whose mundane purpose is to facilitate safe crossing has become a place of danger, linked inextricably with the workings of death [12].

Indeed, bridges are perennially notorious for the attraction they exert upon potential suicides. The Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco is a prime example, a genuine suicidal 'black spot'. The Bridge of Sighs is famous as the bridge in Venice over which prisoners were taken to be executed; but it is also an old nickname for London's Waterloo Bridge, which used to be a popular venue for suicides, and was the inspiration for Thomas Hood's poem *The Bridge of Sighs*:

*One more Unfortunate,
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death.*

But if bridges represent the journey of the dead to the otherworld, they are also associated with the return of the dead to the land of the living. A German tradition tells that when crops are plentiful, Charlemagne crosses the Rhine over a golden bridge at Bingen to give his blessing to the fields and



vineyards. Bridges are often believed to be haunted, like the crossroads to which, as symbols, they are closely related.

The exploitation of bridge imagery is not confined to myth, cinema, and literature. Bridges are obvious targets in wartime. Yet while they usually have an undoubted strategic value, the energy and firepower expended upon bridges is often out of all proportion to any military interest the structure might arouse. Probably the best example is the lengthy onslaught suffered by the

historic bridge at Mostar in Bosnia, not very long ago. It is generally acknowledged that the Serbs' interest in the Mostar bridge was dictated by its symbolic nature, linking as it did the Serb-held part of the town with the predominantly Moslem area; its destruction was a symbol of ethnic differences that the Serbian militia would no longer tolerate. Proverbially, bridge-builders are diplomats and peace-makers, those who seek to heal rifts and establish common ground. Given the

ongoing failure of diplomacy in the war-torn states that were once a united Yugoslavia, the destruction of the Mostar bridge is all the more poignant, and doubly disturbing.

In ancient Rome, Horatius Cocles was traditionally credited with saving the city from the Etruscans commanded by Lars Porsenna, who were attacking the wooden bridge across the Tiber, the *Pons Sublicius*. Horatius, so the story goes, fought off the invaders with the help of two noblemen who had been shamed into assisting him, while others destroyed the bridge behind them. The usual story has it that Horatius, having sent his two comrades back, swam across the Tiber when the bridge fell; but in another version, the hero dies [13]. This hero-tale may have grown up to explain the ritual casting of straw effigies called *Argei* into the river from the same bridge every May, and an old statue - supposedly of Horatius - that stood there [14]. The rationale may lie in the Roman idea of Rome itself: as an ideal state and also a representation of the cosmos, Rome is a notional paradise, its citizenship not given lightly. Perhaps here we see the Roman penchant for historicising older mythology in terms of the actual city: the *Argei* would thus be symbolic of those who do not belong there, and are cast into the waters in the same way as those unworthy souls who fall from the bridge to paradise in the mythologies mentioned above. Horatius then occupies the same mythological niche as Heimdallr, or the various other watchmen, porters, and guardian creatures that bar the bridge.

It is as a link between this world and the next that the image of the bridge is at its most potent. The Cinvat bridge recurs, as an object of veneration and as a cipher for admission to paradise, throughout Iranian religious literature. The Pope is known as the 'sovereign pontiff', a title derived from that of the chief priest of pagan Rome, the

Pontifex Maximus - literally, the 'greatest bridge-builder', the link between the divine and the mundane. Papal commands - which are effectively Church dogma - help determine who gets into the Catholic heaven and who does not; the bridge-builder is thus also its guardian, and it is he who sets the crucial tests that sort the worthy from the unworthy. The bridge between worlds is ever perilous.

References:

- 1: On the timelessness of liminal places and states, see Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London, 1974), p238-9.
- 2: E.W. West (trans.), *Pahlavi Texts Part IV: Contents of the Nasks* (Oxford 1892; reprinted Delhi 1965), p210.
- 3: Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, 1964), p202.
- 4: Ibid., p311.
- 5: Chrétien de Troyes (trans, Nigel Bryant), *Perceval: The Story of the Grail* (Cambridge, 1982), p169. Earlier in the same text, the hero crosses an ivory bridge that gives him a scare: 'behind him the bridge, so perilous and fearsome to cross, was crumbling all away: Perceval thought it would collapse into the abyss, for it was shaking so mightily and furiously' (p163). Perceval puts his faith in the mule he is riding, and she bears him across with 'neither ill nor pain.'
- 6: Eliade, op. cit., p281-2.
- 7: Ibid., p 446-7.
- 8: H.R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (Cambridge, 1943), p171-3.
- 9: Ibid., p186.
- 10: Ibid., p190.
- 11: The name also occurs as *Bilrost*, which some have considered the earlier form. As it is, this would mean something like 'temporary way'; in a wider cosmological context, 'trembling way' would be more apposite. See Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Cambridge, 1993), p36-7 for entries under both forms of the name.
- 12: Mary Douglas, *Purity and*

Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London, 1966): 'Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others' (p96). This idea has been called into question - see for example, Rodney Needham, *Symbolic Classification* (Santa Monica, 1979), p46; Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford, 1989), p164-6, both of whom suggest that there is no inherent danger, but that, as Lincoln concludes, 'In: the right hands, however, and under the right circumstances, such anomalous entities can become potent weapons' (p170). It must be stressed that Lincoln is primarily concerned with anomalous individuals and things, as distinct from the transitional states discussed here - and in these states, danger is a constant factor. Individuals in liminal states are always at some risk, especially if entry into the next state has moral strings attached.

13: Jane F. Gardner, *Roman Myths* (London, 1993), p45-6.

14: *Argei* were kept at twenty-seven *sacra Argeorum*, minor shrines located around Rome; the effigies resembled men bound hand and foot (R.M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods*, London, 1969, p87). Ogilvie opines that this ceremony was a substitute for an earlier rite in which old men were sacrificed in the same manner, and states that a similar sacrifice was recorded as having been performed in 440 BC, citing a later proverb, 'off the bridge with the sixty-year-olds' (p88). This does not rule out the possibility that those old men were symbolic sinners or scapegoats, their drowning ensuring the continued identity of Rome as the ideal city-state - an earthly paradise.

TIME & PLACE

The TV of our minds

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Place is different to different people living at the same time: to the farmer, the town-dweller, the traveller, the archaeologist, the thief, the geologist, the gypsy, the poet, the painter. . . As to how place was perceived by different people in different places in different times, we can hardly guess.

Time - in the sense of linear, past/future, primitive/progressive time - is a fiction. Time is very much bound up with the sense of self, and hence with ego. Place is very much bound up with property, inheritance and money on the one hand, and with collectivity or connection on the other.

Our modern sense of time and place together are also bound up with nationalisms - whether the national socialism of 'Land and Blood', the right-wing romanticism of Arthurian, 'Celtic' Albion, or the cosy, folksy National Trust sense of 'heritage' (or, in France, the whole ethos contained in the word *Patrimoine*). It is the 'National' Trust, not The People's or Volks- Trust. This title says a lot about the generally-accepted concept of a unitary United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Time and place are unavoidably political.

We tend to tunnel our vision to a fantastic past while we help to rape the planet in the present, so that there will be no future. We should be hugging the trees, disposing of our own waste, and changing our paleolithic consciousness, rather than treating landscape as a

'heritage' and nostalgia trip. How many of us have a sacred grove in the garden to worship nature in?

How did Roman slaves think of the Tuscan countryside? How did Etruscans or Syrians perceive the Roman Empire, and early Christians the desert? How differently do the English, the Irish, the Russians and the Senegalese think of the sea? What did the Anglo-Saxons think about Stonehenge? These apparently simple questions can only be partially answered after years or even generations of research. So questions which we now pose about past time and place are perverse.

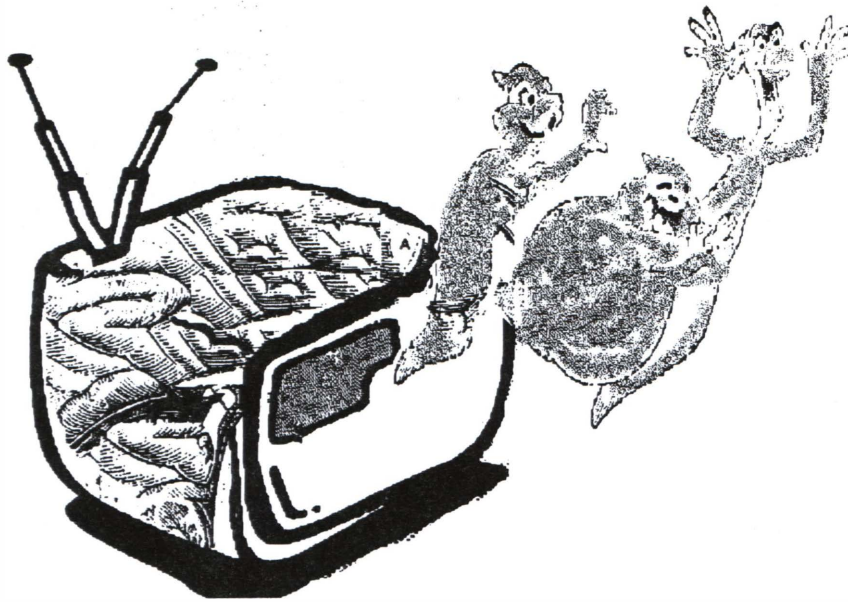
The principal problem is that they incorporate the Historical Fallacy: the projection on to the past of the concerns of the present. Victorians were obsessed with grand schemes and unitary concepts. In the wake of the collapse of Christian totalitarianism, which followed the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, they wanted an alternative grand explanation of everything, so we got Gibbon, Carlyle, Frazer, Darwin, Freud and thousands of others. Instead of Time being a working out of God's Will from the Fall to the New Jerusalem, they saw it as a working-out of Progress from the 'primitive' to the masterful and successful.

Wordsworth and a few Romantics took a slightly different view: Man has fallen from a state of Primitive Grace to which we can return only through simplicity, integrity, honesty. Marx followed the

Romantic view of history, whereas Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche and their successors followed the Progressive view. They are two sides of the same post-medieval coin, and we have varying degrees and mixtures of their related mind-sets.

Reality is simply a matter of convention

Our concept of reality is artificial and culture-bound. We imagine the 'real' world to be a projection of our egos which in turn are formed by the public world which controls economies and families alike. The 'real' world for us at the end of the twentieth century is the world of jobs and 'leisure', money and progress, success (by which we mean fame) and a whole pile of comparatively recent cultural baggage. It is a matter of 'education': the process of leading us out of any kind of inner awareness - which is why so many adolescents want to 'get out of their heads': they feel that their heads are not their own. 'Reality' is simply a matter of convention, like good manners and wearing particular kinds of clothes. We assume that there is a definite and definitive 'real world' out there which we only have to examine. This is the scientific fallacy born out of the Renaissance. According to it, knowledge is simply categorising and comprehending a finite real world which adheres to laws of physics and psycho-social dynamics.



'We have become ghosts inside cerebral television sets.'

Drawing by Bob Trubshaw, with apologies to UCS and Amblin, owners of the copyright for 'Caspar'.

Only recently have we begun to realise that this might not be so, that time is circular, and that knowledge is only the currently-acceptable fiction in our heads. It is not our brain that sees, but the learning-structure in our brains. That learning-structure is culturally determined. What we see is what we are programmed to see. And our determinedly unpoetic view of the world today is quite different from any previous world-view.

For a start, we think in terms of global politics and unitary states, in terms of fact versus fiction, truth versus falsehood, past as quite different from present which itself is quite different from future. How can we possibly think ourselves back into a cyclical, flowing world-view? How can we possibly think ourselves into societies in which every stream was sacred and had its genius loci, its angel? Streams for us are at best places to fish, more usually things to bridge, culvert, block or pour our slops into. How can people know landscape or nature when they think that rain is 'bad weather'?

The past that archaeologists have dreamed up for us is no

more than a cultural dream: without substance, without empathy. We apply our cultural vision to paleolithic hunting society, and we come up with something a good deal less 'real' than Plato's Cave.

We go through ten to fifteen years of schooling during which time all our natural wisdom, poetry and enthusiasm (literally: 'breath from the god') are removed, and emerge finally as emotional cripples unable to hug or to hunt or to know the best time and place to plant leeks. How can we begin to feel landscape the way that hunter-gatherers do and the way that the Celtic-speaking forest-dwellers of Romania or Galicia or Ulster did? We do not give trees special names, we confuse sacrifice with masochism, we only recognise a 'magic' place if it has signposts telling us so or megalithic remains. Yet there are 'magic' places everywhere - even occasionally within the ugliness of towns.

We have no sense of the sacred: we do not have shrines in our houses. We suffer and make the world suffer the dislocation, disjunction and anomie of ego-consciousness which seeks to blot out all but

itself. Once kings were slain after ritual, poetic rule, and children exposed on mountain sides. Now we expose children to a far worse fate: the nuclear family, television and the education system.

When we travel it is rarely on pilgrimage or to sacred places to acquire depth or wisdom, but to cities and resorts for merely hedonistic (or business) reasons. Ours is a culture of arrogance and instant gratification.

The sacred orgy has been suppressed, and is now replaced by compulsive, uncathartic, unshared shopping and spectator sport. Poetry has been replaced by the catalogue - whether of facts or of consumer goods. Rites of passage and ritual ordeals have been supplanted by curricular examinations. Reverence for the natural world has been usurped by religion and art. We now treat each other as producers and consumers, rather than integral parts of nature, and so we are alienated from that which has become our past, our 'collective unconscious'.

Language has replaced 'nature' as our matrix

Our culture has separated the animal from the human and condemned most of the higher forms of life upon this planet to extermination or misery. It has separated the sexual from the spiritual, and by dividing 'sacred' from 'profane' we have profaned the sexual and rendered the spiritual hollow: form without substance. These antinomian separations of category have put us at war with the planet and with our own natures; these separations are *linguistic*, embedded in the way we think because we think in language. We are expected to fit into our language the way we are not expected to fit into the natural world. To a large extent, language has replaced 'nature' as our matrix. We have gone 'out of control' largely because of language: invent a concept or a distinction and it cannot be

uninvented. Language only appears to describe reality, but in reality it is not transparent, and describes only our language-based view of the world.

Instead of sacredness we now have a cult of the picturesque. Landscape has no meaning for us any more: at most it is a political symbol of one kind or another. We smile at names like The Paps of Anu (twin rounded hills in County Cork), and can no longer think of mountains as sacred to the Hag Goddess (Slieve na Calliagh). Landscape is merely to be used (if only for 'leisure', whatever that is!) not to be lived, experienced. Few people actually 'get high' on landscape, whether in north-east Portugal, west Herefordshire, southern Albania, central France or South Fermanagh. Others may see it but do not *let it enter them*. We have become ghosts inside cerebral television sets.

Human consciousness is a confusing mixture of states, an amalgam of intermingling or contradictory degrees of awareness. Pygmies, Australian Aborigines, Niugini hunters, the Kogi of Colombia, the Siberian reindeer-herdsmen all have awarenesses and world-views quite different from our own. They to a large extent have what might be called 'unfolding consciousness'. We in 'The West', on the other hand, in a culture uniquely defined by left-brain ego (which itself gets defined not by language, but by literature) have an 'imposing consciousness': instead of being open to worlds of awareness, we have defined a single 'real world' and simply impose it on the whole planet. We have a uniquely totalitarian vision and culture.

Let me offer the example of 'Beauty'. In our culture, this is simply the decoration of a drab existence and an ugly world. But, unlike the sense of time passing, which is a mental fiction created by ego, beauty is an intrinsic feature of all other world-views. Only highly evolved people in our own

culture of gaudified drabness actually see beauty, whether it is fields or hedgerows, streets or clouds. Paradoxically our culture, which relies so heavily on the visual and auditory senses to the exclusion of the senses of smell and touch, does not actually see beauty very much. We may see 'views', for example, which conform to romantic abstractions of beauty dreamed up (for our culture is very much a sleep-denying culture of sleepwalkers) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

We are detached from everything by a concept of linear time

So, when we come to places like Stonehenge, we simply do not connect. We rush to literature and come up with crazy dreams of Druids and astronomers created not by people who are connected with the past or with the place, but by people anxious 'to explain' in terms of our own culture - in terms of 'progress', technology, competition, tribalism and racism. Because we have murdered myth in our minds, we have no mind-maps to tune into the (now irreparably desecrated) Boyne Valley, or Carnac, so we create legends of explanation which are drier and less revelatory than the incinerated bones found in Newgrange. We see Stonehenge through layer upon layer of dusty academic or cranky hypothesis, and not through our feet (the part of us which should connect with the earth) or through our genitals, or through the many other channels of awareness that our culture denies.

A good example of our stubborn narrowness is the phenomenon of holed stones. It is perfectly obvious to anyone who has travelled around looking at these stones that in most of them the hole is about 1 metre from the end or ground level, and that the hole is usually about 75mm in

diameter, often chamfered in to that diameter. Therefore it is extremely likely that a human penis was inserted at a particular time of year or on a particular occasion, to symbolise union with the earth which in turn encourages fertility of various kinds. We block that kind of intuition because we are a Christian culture, and Christian culture is obsessed with blood and not with sperm.

'New Age' and 'Earth Mystery' people are in a bad perceptive situation, because they want to have the cake of prehistoric mystery and yet eat it with the teeth of our totalitarian world-view which denies mystery and thus destroys connection. It is well-known that Australian Aborigines have a 'holistic' approach to the world: they perceive themselves as *being* the land and everything on it and in it, in a cyclical and comprehensible universe, whereas we are detached from everything by a concept of linear time (in which we are the apogee) and by a resultantly infantile categorising of an immensely complex universe outside and within our heads. It is interesting that a culture so sophisticated and technological as ours increasingly infantilises and therefore disempowers its members (and, for that matter, dogs) by making them dependent for their neurotic survival on gadgets and gewgaws which even a hundred years ago would have been thought ridiculous.

Our attitude to animals (who are souls, 'anima', unlike us who have become animus) shows that we do not have any reverence for creatures and things outside our ego-boxes and outside the little crate of destructive tricks that is our culture. We do not apologise to or even acknowledge the death of the animals we eat and torture. Until we do, we and the

attitude we have created out of ego-pain will make real pain universal.

We see the land in terms of aggressive defence and exploitation (this is one of the hidden agendas behind the Glastonbury/Arthur/Celtic industry), whereas pre-literate people see it as holy and the source of everything. Compare the smothering of the land with horrible houses (not to mention factories and military installations) everywhere with the erection of temporary shelters. Our idea of the once and future king mirrors our militaristic-nationalistic outlook. Our obsession with the 'Celtic' is a curious historical quirk deriving from that most unmythic of countries, Ireland, for valid political reasons (independence from the Evil Empire across the Irish Sea).

'Celtic' is now used as a racial term, when it is simply a word to describe a certain group of languages which is akin to many other Indo-European languages such as the Latin/Greek/Albanian group, the Nordic/Germanic group, and the Slav group. If a 'Celtic spirit' still survives it is certainly not to be found in the Celtic Fringe but in the Celtic heartland, France). Yet recent research has shown that French place-names, most of which mean nothing in the modern language (unlike Danish, Spanish, Irish, Dutch, German and Slav place-names), contain pre-Celtic and Ligurian elements.

It appears that any relevant studies of time and place are virtually impossible from inside the linguistic television sets that our minds have become. In order to 'see' we will have to get out of the television set - which is very difficult since language itself (never mind the education system) has locked us inside it. To attempt to break out would be pointless. The only way to get out is to float with the aid of timeless intuition, which the written word constantly undermines and contradicts.

In other words, we can escape from the totalitarian televue only by subverting language. This point is crucial, because at the root of the destructiveness of our civilisation and the limitation of its world-view is *prose*. We try to interpret and understand everything through prose which is a kind of self-setting language-trap, rather than poetry, which is creative.

Life and the world are much more subtle than our prose- and 'fact'- based civilisation is prepared to accept. Poetry has been downgraded to *décor* for the bourgeois mind. We have no Delphic Oracle uttering poetic riddles, no Eleusinian Mysteries - we do not even see the Greek Tragedies any more. The word 'tragedy' meant 'scapegoat' in ancient Greek; in modern Greek it means merely 'song'. Our reality is prosaic and linear: Work/job, The News and Entertainment - and The News is Infotainment. We have disappeared up our narrow, unpoetic cultural arses. How can we possibly think or dream ourselves into the consciousness of Stone Age people when our consciousnesses are bound by such crude ideas as progress and purpose, and our lives depend on toothpaste, toilet rolls, piped water, and all the rubbish that capitalism sells us? Only by poetic vision, which is the subversion of the language (especially the written language). Poetry incorporates flow and tends towards the cyclic.

Nature was for hundreds of thousands of years an enemy to encroaching man

Most people cannot connect with the world-views of twentieth century poetic mystics such as Yeats and Rilke. How can we who are locked in prose start to 'feel the past' of two- or twenty-thousand years ago, when, in a sense, everything must have been poetry?

Since we have invented 'the past' to contradict the cyclically recurring and continuous present,

let us do what we will with its material artefacts. We can put them in museums, fence them around like Stonehenge, seal them up like Lascaux, or turn them into sleazy-glitz prehistory-supermarkets like Newgrange. But we cannot, so long as we have such a concept as 'the past' ever enter it: the idea of 'the past' is a kind of Cerberus keeping us from awareness of place and time. Our prosaic English language itself (advancing across the world) blocks out reality through 'facts' and 'information'. We attack reality with prose, and it crumbles into our fiction.

We also attack the past with prose, projecting on to it our prosaic twentieth century attitudes to function, category purpose and statistics on the one hand, and our current environmental concerns on the other. We desperately see 'the past' as golden with respect for 'The Earth Mother' and so on. But 'nature' was for hundreds of thousands of years an enemy to encroaching man. Perhaps a respected enemy, but our sense of enmity has got us and the planet to the present situation where, instead of seeing ourselves as fragile colonisers in the biosphere, we see the biosphere as fragile. What we mean, of course, is - as always - that the status quo is fragile. For the biosphere will survive the sixth great extinction of species which we are well on our way to engineering - but in a radically different form.

To escape the historical fallacy, the mind-set of our culture, we can, I believe, only 'see through time' (which is a fiction) by the means of poetry, one line of which can give more insight than a hundred books of archaeology or anthropology. Ironically enough, the 'poetic approach' will itself diminish our desire to 'understand' the past prosaically, and we will come to see that understanding itself is a prose fiction that has usurped wonder.

Under the Greenwood Tree



They had real dungeons in the Middle Ages, and real dragons if rumour be true. They had knights in shining armour, too, and damsels in distress; wicked barons, wandering minstrels and holy hermits were not unknown. They did not have any psychiatrists, however, and so escaped being counselled on how to give up a fantasy world for real life - which is probably just as well, because the real life of mediaeval people was packed with the sort of figures who have been the stock-in-trade of fantasy writers ever since.

It is hardly surprising that subsequent generations have used the magic mirror of mediaevalism to conjure up visions of their own. Among the nine suspect views of the Middle Ages scheduled by Umberto Eco, the re-invention of romanticism finds an honourable place [1]. But is there a genuine history behind the Gothick mist? Or are we just using romance as a therapy for the unease we feel about breaking with the past? Without the repudiation of mediaeval Christendom, romantic or not, none of the liberties and conveniences of our secular civilisation would have had a chance to flourish. Each of us is a little like the young Byron, inhabiting comfortable apartments tacked onto a monastic ruin, and getting a perverse pleasure from limping about the haunted wing in fancy dress.

But mediaeval people knew about fancy dress too. Their art and architecture can be a living extravagance, a genuine fantasy. Look at St Michaels Mount rising pinnacle on

pinnacle from the sea, or pass through some city gatehouse exuding municipal pomp, or walk into the underworld piety of the Royston Cave. These structures are deliberately romantic; they are meant to evoke atmosphere, not to serve as plain lodgings for monks or knights. If this is their effect on us now, what must it have been like when the art of pageantry was in full swing, when dragons and giants and the Nine Worthies were on the streets, and every conduit flowed with wine?

Well, you may say, there was genuine romance and fantasy for the elite, who could afford it. But the countryside was different. The countryside, in a view still widely held, was the home of dour and pragmatic peasants with as much aesthetic imagination as a turnip, and visions of beauty in the landscape are cultural constructs with a suspect class pedigree. As for the mystic power of Nature, this is something that Wordsworth and Coleridge cooked up on one of their walking tours to entertain a mass-circulation public, who would otherwise have felt that

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fields were there to grow things in.

Now our ancestors certainly had a lively sense of what landscape was good for. Whoever you were, rich or poor, in the end you depended on your immediate surroundings for food and clothes and warmth in winter. This straightforward reliance on the earth bred a personal relationship, a love which (like other loves) was enhanced and not diminished by its origin in the business of production. Each harvest was a covenant - 'Thou crownest the year with thy goodness . . . the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing' [2]

'Harvest is the hope of men, when the holy one - God, king of heaven - makes the earth bear the shining corn for rich and poor alike' [3]. The power of this relationship is shown by the eagerness of urban tradesmen - the only class excluded from it - to join in. As early as the twelfth century village lordships were being acquired for use as second homes; Cuddington in

Surrey, acquired with the profit on war loans for the Third Crusade, is a recognisable ancestor of the stockbroker belt [4].

If harvest was a sacrament, infertility was a curse. Mediaeval people were alive to the fearfulness of barren places as modern Europeans are not. So much of our appreciation of nature is based on an ability to travel to a viewpoint, admire, and return home in time for tea. When exposure to the world was less cushioned, a quite different set of literary expectations were prompted. 'I must go walk the wood so wild', says a fifteenth-century poet, and we imagine he is after the healing power of nature. But no, he is going to live off acorns and tree-water because he has been betrayed in love and life cannot get any worse. Another forlorn lover, Sir Orfeo, goes into the woods as to a living death - 'Nothing he findeth that him is ease/ But ever he liveth in great malaise' [5].

Medieval aesthetic of woodland

Surely, if uncultivated land was held in such abhorrence, we are wasting our time looking for a mediaeval aesthetic of wilderness. Should we not rather regard our ancestors as so many William Cobbetts, with 'no idea of picturesque beauty separate from fertility of soil'? [6] Well, no. The popularity of wilderness in fiction suggests that, after all, it had a fascination bound up with its horror. The tangled trail runs from Broceliande - 'a thick forest... full of briars and thorns' to the Cheshire moors, 'naked rocks/ As claterand from the crest the cold burn runs', through which Gawain toils his way [7]. These places may not have been credited with beauty, but they were certainly landscapes to stir the imagination. And genuine landscapes, too: the romancer Wace scrambled through some very real briars at Broceliande/ Paimpont looking (unsuccessfully) for fairies [8].



Fear and contempt for the wild were not a natural feature of the mediaeval mind but the expression of certain literary conventions. Turn to a different literature, and the picture changes. English poetry, which is conceived on French and Latin models, is limited in its response to wild nature; the Celtic languages are not. Suibhne, like Orfeo, is a mad king in the forest, but it is the Irish lunatic who delights in the beauty of his surroundings. Manchán, the tenth-century hermit of Liath, calls for 'a secret hut in the wilderness . . . a beautiful wood close by around it on every side' [9]. Comparisons of this kind show the pitfalls that await if we judge what people might have felt only from what they happened to write. A Welsh poet like Dafydd ap Gwilym saw the same hills and trees as Chaucer, but he was able to express his feelings about them through the traditions of a different language. Besides, literature is not the only way of expressing feelings. There is nothing in Old English poetry to match the Gaelic poems in praise of places, but almost every Irish epithet may be

paralleled in the English place names themselves. At a rough reckoning, half of the descriptive epithets in Dorset names point out features with limited practical value - including, in the natural history line, such things as wall-germander, tansy, frogs, woodpeckers and gudgeon [10]. No-one would have observed these details who was not sensitive to the natural world.

The English delight in wild nature was expressed in ritual rather than poetry. Those same woods which in night or winter had been so monstrous, became the scene of delight on May morning. 'They took their horses with the queen and rode on-maying in woods, and meadows as it pleased them, in great joy and delights . . . bedashed with herbs, moss and flowers in the freshest manner' [11]. In the calendrical works of the months, May is usually represented as a young man carrying two branches of greenery. And this delight in the springing of the leaves is expressed in that evocative term 'the greenwood': a word purely poetical, not borrowed from the terms of art of lawyers or estate bailiffs. It is in the greenwood

that the nightingale and thrush are heard to sing, it is to its shade that lovers and outlaws flee.

A strange and marginal world

The wild woods, whether beautiful or terrifying, were a strange and marginal world. May Day rituals were not simply celebrating greenness and vitality. By retrieving them from the Puckish environment of the woods these qualities were brought to the safety of the home. Even here trophies from the wildwood had to be treated with respect, and there is a long-standing prejudice against actually taking may blossom into the house. The forest is a chancey place. Anything may come to meet you under its boughs; that is the literal meaning of the ad-ventures for which Arthurian knights make their quest. In the outlaw literature, the greenwood is the place where men who are no longer men, who bear a wolf's head, can eke out a hidden existence in the shade. In an earlier essay [12] I argued that in mediaeval imagery the high and the low, kings and beggars, display an unexpected resemblance through their shared marginal status outside the social order. If this were so, one would expect kings to have had a special interest in forests. And they did.

A forest, says the lawyer Manwood, is 'a certain territory of woody grounds and fruitful pastures... in the safe protection of the king, for his princely delight and pleasure' [13]. Admittedly the royal pleasure was in killing things, and the sophisticated machinery of forest law was dedicated to preserving beasts of the chase for their eventual fate, not to maintaining areas of outstanding natural beauty. The forest, in Rackham's felicitous phrase, was a place of deer, not a place of trees. For all the lawyers cared, it might as well be a heath or fen instead of a wood. Diversity of environment was to

be expected, in any case, when whole counties like Rutland or Essex could be afforested by a stroke of the pen - a power intended, not to increase the number of deer, but to raise funds by fining those who disturbed their notional habitat.

On their first introduction into English, the words *desert* and *forest* were synonymous, neither of them referring to a type of landscape but to a much more anthropocentric feature - the fact that nobody lived there. It was because they were uninhabitable that forests were claimed as royal enclaves, a property outside the boundaries of society which came to the king. But the image of the forest could change, with the suddenness of sunlight coming out from behind a cloud, away from the gloom of savage wildness and into the radiance of the greenwood. 'For the very sight and beholding of the goodly green and pleasant woods in a forest is no less pleasant and delightful in the eye of a prince than the view of the wild beasts of forest and chase, and therefore the grace of a forest is to be decked and trimmed up with store of pleasant green coverts, as it were green arbours of pleasure for the king to delight himself in' [14].

The mediaeval forest was intended to be beautiful and mysterious, as deliberately as any cathedral. In neither case was there any likelihood of a return on investment. Even in their thirteenth-century heyday, it took 500 acres of forest per annum to yield a single deer [15]. No consideration was given to afforestation as a practical strategy for land use. Dartmoor and the New Forest are tracts of poor land placed under forest law for want of any better use, but there is nothing wrong agriculturally with Dean, and a whole belt of forests lay across the fertile Midlands from Huntingdon to Wychwood. Where a palace stood, a forest was required - which meant that where palaces were thickest on the ground, as in Wessex, a

series of minor forests follows them across the map.

Forests were living monuments to kingship, to the princely power to ride through a beautiful and uninhabited landscape dealing out life and death. Actually, the process of killing was done by professional huntsmen who worked the forests on a rota, culling the deer and salting them down in barrels for despatch to London: but that was not the stuff of poetry. Instead we have the noble image of the king's hunt, the pursuit of a magic beast. 'Right so as they sat there come running in a white hart into the hall, and a white brachet next him, and thirty couple of black running hounds come after with a great cry'. The dream-hunt in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess takes place in a May-time wood tinged with otherworldly sadness. And when Orfeo is lost in the hallucinatory wilderness 'He might see him besides/ Oft in hot undertides/ The King of Faerie with his rout/ Come to hunt him all about/ With dim cry and blowing' [16].

The sport of fairy princes, it seems, is much like that of earthly ones. When Pwyll meets Arawn, the otherworldly king, they open with a polite dispute over the stag which they have both pursued [17]. You might suppose that supernatural beings of this kind are being visualised as if they were mediaeval aristocrats, but I sometimes wonder if the imitation was not the other way round. Traditions of the Wild Hunt and its congeners are so universal that it may have been the mortal kings who first went hunting because they wanted to take on themselves the magic of the fairy ride.

Redeeming Robin

But meanwhile, in another part of the forest, the wilderness protects characters of a quite different stamp. 'In summer when the shaws be sheen/ And leaves be large and long/ It is full merry in fair forest/ To hear the fowles song' [18] opens the poet, but this

aesthetic landscape is Sherwood Forest and it harbours Robin Hood and Little John - in their earlier, unreformed avatars before they became a disinherited aristocrat and a Saxon freedom fighter, and were content to do over unwary travellers on the Great North Road. It is the greenwood that redeems Robin, and makes him poetical. Without the forest shades to disguise him, he would be just another mediaeval thug. The magic of his name does not stem from anything in the story line of the ballads, which, though strong on violence, are weak in invention. What really fired the imagination of England was the idea of a free spirit in the woods - 'Robin was in merry Sherwood/ As light as leaf on linde' or (if Yorkshire is the side you support) 'My dwelling is in the wood,' says Robin 'By thee I set right nought;/ My name is Robin Hood of Barnsdale'. His men wear green, like trees. They shoot with the bow, which is part of a tree. They meet, or tryst, at a special tree - 'Then Robin took them both by the hand/ And danced round about the oak tree'; 'Robin he walks in the green forest/ Under his trusty tree' [19]. The roots of the Major Oak run deep.

The mise-en-scène of the Robin Hood ballads is pure romance. Living off the land may have been an option for an earlier generation: Hereward the Wake and his followers are certainly said to have resisted the forces of nine shires from the forest of Bruneswald, but even in the eleventh century this corner of Huntingdonshire can hardly have been a pathless wilderness, and it is more likely that the legend of his resistance shows how an ideal connection of wilderness and liberty was already firing the imagination [20]. Afterwards real bandits took to dramatising themselves in the language of the ballads. In 1336 Lionel, King of the Rout of Robbers (a Yorkshireman who also answered to the name of Adam of Ravensworth) was threatening the north with a



later dated from 'our castle of the wind in the Greenwood Tower in the first year of our reign' [21]. He uses the same imagery of the geomantic tree-as-castle and of the free greenwood; we need not enquire into the squalid reality, except to suggest that Adam probably spent more of his time indoors than he cared to admit. Mediaeval England was not covered with vast tracts of wildwood into which outlaws could disappear without trace; the tree cover in Sherwood was about 25 square miles, scattered in discontinuous coppices [22] and cannot have afforded much of a hideout. Real outlaws, as recognised by the Statute of Winchester, liked to crouch in the brushwood adjoining main roads before mugging travellers and returning to drink the profits in the nearest market town.

The forest glade and the merry men are pure romance. But at least they are genuine mediaeval romance - the lure of the greenwood was there in the poems from the beginning and is not a later nostalgic development. By turning the woods into an endless labyrinthine refuge from the world of law, minstrels could turn Robin Hood into the master of a magical territory, an anti-king of inverted values, a prince of thieves in John Major's phrase. Robber kings and their antitheses, blue-blooded

bandits, are not an invention of the gothic novel. The merry men in the fourteenth-century romance of *Gamelyn* announce that 'our master is crowned of outlaws king'; and the climax of the fifteenth-century ballad of the *Nut-Brown Maid* comes when a soi-disant banished man reveals (in the manner of the chorus in the *Pirates of Penzance*) that he is the son of a peer [23]. Robin Hood takes this metaphor a stage further. He lives in the king's forest; he lives off the king's deer; he passes judgement on the king's officers. The narrative of the *Little Gest* develops steadily to the point where the real king goes in person to the greenwood, feasts in disguise among Robin's band, and then reveals his identity. After that climactic meeting everything winds down, since Robin can no longer act as a king-by-proxy. He leaves the marginal environment of the forest, goes to court, goes to seed, and his last adventure is his death.

Paradoxically, this regal imagery refers to a state of things which was already archaic by the time the ballads were composed. Between 1300 and 1325 the machinery of forest administration fell into disuse; visits of justices ceased and the administration of courts passed to local initiative [24]. Forestry changed its emphasis from the production of venison to the growth of timber - though

deer parks, the economic successors to forests, continued to supply meat until the days of Capability Brown [25]. Later generations of royalty had certainly lost none of their passion for hunting. Henry VIII had a great circuit of palaces built in Surrey, each with an associated park where he could act the part of an invincible master at the expense, for once, of wildlife rather than wives. 'The hunt is up, the hunt is up/ And it is well nigh day/ And Harry our King is gone hunting/ To bring his deer to bay' [26]. But the days of the forest as an otherworldly landscape were over. Charles I tried reinstating them as a tax dodge in the years of personal rule but, when he died, the magic died with him.

The dangers of viewing the past through a haze of romance are well known. At *the Edge* readers, of all people, ought to be on their guard against it. But it is just as blinkered to regard mystical, intuitive responses to the spirit of place as if they were a modern invention, a form of recreation unknown to our blunt ancestors. People are more complicated than that, and so is the landscape, which people share and always have shared with supernatural forces.

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The WISE MEN



of GOTHAM

*Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, I must neds
laughe in my selfe,
The wise men of Gotum are
risen againe.*

'Misogonus' 1560

Indeed, the Wise Men of Gotham are risen again. The 'Gotham Tales' are a cycle of stories about feign madness. They first became associated with the village of Gotham (pron. 'goat ham') in Nottinghamshire around 1540. At this date a selected twenty of the tales first appeared in print. However, the true origin and antiquity of the whole cycle is something else. This article discusses two of the many mysteries that surround the topic - the location of the village of mad men (I prefer Fools) and the authorship of the first chapbook, *The Merry Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham*. Let us begin with the printed text and work backwards.

In the reign of Henry VIII around the year 1540 an amusing collection of stories was published under the title of *The merry tales of the mad men of Gotham* by the mysterious 'A.B. of Phisicke Doctor'. With subsequent editions, the word 'mad' was changed for 'wise' and the myth of the Wise Men of Gotham was born. The pseudonym A.B. was a clever ploy by the publisher of this time to make people believe (successfully it seems) that the author was none other than Andrew Borde. Borde never denied or accepted involvement in the publication. He was a popular humorist and writer at this time.

The question arises as to why the work needed a pseudonym. One answer may lie in the textual content of the stories. Whatever Borde's involvement (if any), and the identity behind A.B., one thing is certain - the author of the stories and that of

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the book were never one and the same. 'The Wise Men of Gotham' is a collection of stories compiled into a single work. It can be demonstrated clearly that many of the stories, perhaps all, were not original and existed before 1540.

At least one of the twenty published tales makes an appearance in an earlier MS. This was a work entitled *Description Norfolciensium* written by a monk of Peterborough some time in the twelfth century. In this story it is the folk of Norfolk that are accused of 'madness'.

Even a cursory glance at the tales indicates that they are pre-Reformation in origin. Included in the stories are references to: the Mass, crossing oneself in protection from the Devil, and other clearly catholic practices. This may be the reason behind Borde's reluctance to the appearance of his full name on the title page. However, bearing in mind the almost instant success of the work among the nobility, the Church and royalty, any fear on Borde's part would have been quickly dispelled. His direct involvement must be strongly questioned.

Such was the popularity of the work it continued to be re-published almost unchanged to the end of the nineteenth century. The tales were even exported to America by Washington Irvine who then spawned the title of 'Gotham City' (a city of fools) on his native New York. This in turn developed into the Gotham City of Batman.

Popular appeal

What was the popular appeal of these twenty short stories such that they successfully spanned the centuries and even continents? Were they really written to make people laugh? It is clear that the tales are not the work of a single author. Their style varies and we have seen that at least one is 400 years older than the first printed collection. Clearly humour changes, or does it?

Are we looking at just a popular 'joke book'? Can a twelfth century joke be equally as funny in the sixteenth century and still be making people laugh at the end of the last century? When we read the stories today the humour is very basic and barely raises a smile. Stapleton writing about the 'twenty tales' found it equally difficult to comprehend their value as jokes. Many of the stories have a perverse logic that seems to appeal to the human mind. For example, the tale of the man who carried his sacks of grain around his own neck while still riding his horse - the idea being to relieve the animal of the extra burden of the weight of the sacks.

Urban myths of their time

The tales possess something deeper than humour, a mythical timeless quality. This is precisely what I believe them to be - they are perhaps the 'urban myths' of their day. Tales that we know cannot be true but which we like to believe happened. It seems strange that modern folklore magazines such as *Fortean Times* and *Folklore Frontiers* publish modern urban myths collected by well-known writers such as Paul Screeeton. What has led to the popular appeal of these modern tales among today's readers?

A question of origin

The twenty tales have been localised to Gotham in Nottinghamshire. However, there is another Gotham, in Sussex, that lays claim to the tales, as in discussed by Mr Stevens at the end of this article. The deep fascination of the stories has been with the complexities of both the stories and their history and origin. One of the complexities is this 'other' Gotham. While it is true that the supposed compiler of the tales, Andrew Borde, was born in Sussex not from the other Gotham, it is equally certain that the tales are written about Gotham in Nottinghamshire if we are to

believe the Rev E. Cobham Brewer (1810-97). In his work *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* under the heading Gotham he says the twenty tales were written by Andrew Borde '... a native of Gotham in Nottinghamshire' and were 'founded on a commission signed by Henry VIII to the magistrates of that town to prevent poaching'.

However, no other early author on the subject mentions Brewer's comments. So we must look again for a clear answer as to which Gotham. Firstly, the tales are all clearly about a village called Gotham. The Sussex Gotham was never a village or even a hamlet. It was only a manor in the parish of Hailsham. Any local writer would have known this and we would be looking at the 'Mad men of Hailsham' and not Gotham.

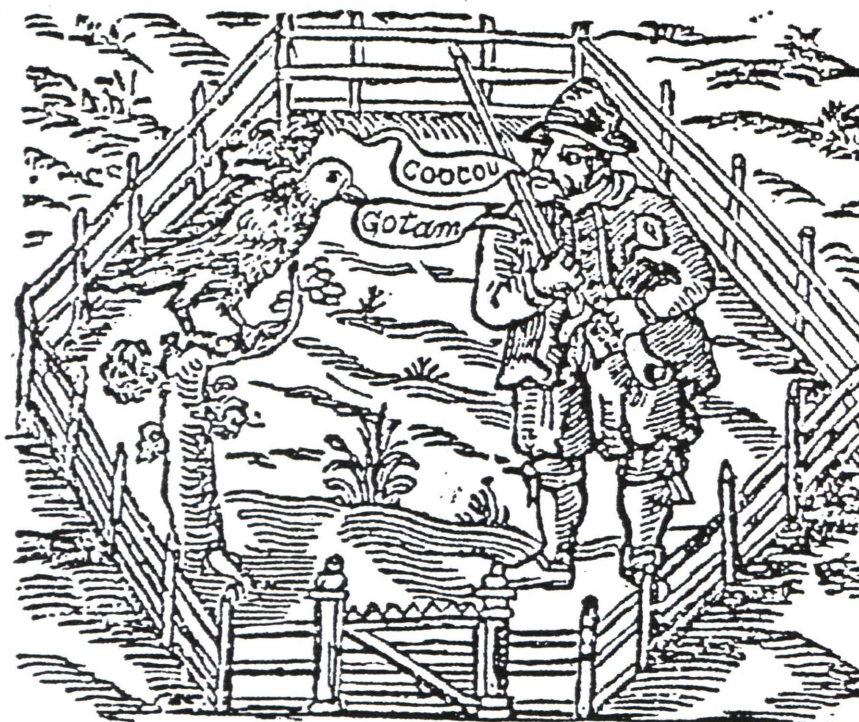
Early editions of the printed tales mention Nottingham market and also that the village was on a direct route to York. One of the stories states that the Gothamites paid rent to the lordships of Leicester and Chester. This is a historical fact of the Nottinghamshire village.

Other villages of fools

As previously stated, Gotham only became the 'best known' village of fools because of the published tales. There are at least 45 other villages in England and one in Wales that claim as their own one or more of the Gotham cycle of tales. The tales were once very wide spread. Gotham is unique in that it not only preserves a complete collection of tales (plus many more in oral tradition) but also preserves many of the locations of the stories.

The Cuckoo Bush Tale

The central story in the Gotham cycle and perhaps the best-known is the 'Cuckoo Bush Tale'. This is one of the best examples of an overtly pagan interpretation. Briefly, the tale tells how the men of Gotham heard a cuckoo calling from a bush. In an effort to preserve



Woodcut from the title page of the 1630 edition of *The Merry Tales of the Wise Men of Gotham*, depicting the third of the twenty tales, the hedging of the cuckoo.

The illustration on page 20 is from a later edition.

springtime eternally they set about to build a hedge or fence around the bush to keep the bird in place. Their efforts were thwarted when the cuckoo flew away. The punch line to the joke of the story comes when the Gothamites are made to say 'If only we had made the hedge higher, she would not have escaped.'

This same myth is located in at least half of the other villages where the tales of foolery are told. Gotham has the site of the Cuckoo Bush preserved in the shape of an ancient mound on a hill above the village. There are a number of villages that preserve the site of a 'Cuckoo Pen' without any attendant legend of its use. At Wing in Leicestershire, renowned for its ancient turf maze, there is a tumulus where the villages are said to have penned a cuckoo; the cuckoo still gives its name to a village pub.

Popular belief preserved in myth tells us that before the knowledge of migration the cuckoo was believed to spend

the winter in a fairy mound or tumulus. The birds' role as a herald of spring and its association with the Otherworld are widely accepted. Could it be that mounds like that at Gotham were built as a winter home for the cuckoo?

Interestingly, the Teutonic word *gauch* meant 'fool' and has given rise to the dialect word 'gawk' meaning both 'fool' and 'cuckoo'.

Feigned madness

Why did the Gothamites act like 'mad men' or 'fools'? With at least twenty tales of foolery to their credit, there must have been a good reason for their behaviour. The published tales do not give us a reason for their action. However one existed and was known about from the time of the earliest reference to the 'fools of Gotham', much earlier than the first printed tales. There are two popular versions of the same excuses for foolery that have accompanied the tales through their travels through time. basically, both versions are

the same tale with the same results.

King John, we are told, was making his way towards Nottingham. His route would have taken him directly through land owned by the village of Gotham. At this time it was believed that wherever the King made his way would become a public highway. The Gothamites did not want to pay for the upkeep of the new King's Highway. Madness was said to be contagious and, when the King's herald arrived in the village, he found the inhabitants engaged in various acts of apparent insanity. When news reached the ears of the King, John quickly changed direction to avoid the village of 'mad men'.

The second version of the story states that King John was about to build a hunting lodge (or some say castle) near Gotham. The story continues in the same manner as the first, with the result that the King changes his plans.

However, there is a third version of the 'King John origin' which is less-known but more interesting.

Where the Sun King was stopped

This version was collected from several villagers by Stapleton on his research visits to Gotham about 1899. The story begins as previously, with King John and his followers making their way towards the village. Then the story changes drastically. We are told that he reached a spot on the outskirts of the village somewhere on Gotham Moor (for this to be true, John would have to be on his way from Nottingham and not to it). Stapleton's Gothamite informant insisted that the King was in his chariot - not the vehicle of a twelfth century monarch. Three farmers of Gotham physically stopped the King's progress by seizing hold of the lead horses. They then chained the chariot wheels to a post which they had previously fixed into the ground. Thus John

ye nede not to wite: if ye fulke my sake - / In my lath
 hold ye my maye: this shal I gon to pado
 So hyt I & my hand lath to ye shal band
 Sum way and by hand So hyt I and I shal
 Is not all this to do: and no more it is to go
 nor that is no do: but I shal go to pado
 And ye shal be all to do: and I shal go to pado
 So hyt I and I shal go to pado: and I shal go to pado
 And seke it againe //
 way do not be faine //
 So hyt I and I shal go to pado: and I shal go to pado
 So hyt I and I shal go to pado: and I shal go to pado
 So hyt I and I shal go to pado: and I shal go to pado
 So hyt I and I shal go to pado: and I shal go to pado

The 'Wickirk Play'. This is the first written reference to the 'foles of gotham' (third line from bottom). From the style of writing, this anonymous work probably was written between 1425-50.

was prevented from going further. Here the story ends, without mention of further acts of madness. The final passage in this version tells how the men of Gotham raised a mound round the post to commemorate their feat.

Stapleton was taken to the spot and shown the remains of the 'actual mound'. He describes this as looking like the ploughed-out remains of a tumulus. Actually, Stapleton was shown two such mounds within a few yards of each other. The one mentioned first was the best preserved of the two. There is a disputed reference in the Nottinghamshire volume of *The Victoria History of the English Counties* to the opening of a tumulus at Gotham and the finding of a bronze spear head. The report has been regarded as a mistaken reference to a tumulus in Derbyshire. This, I believe, has arisen because no modern archaeologist has ventured to accept that the mound(s) seen by Stapleton might have been prehistoric. Gotham Moor lies in close proximity to the Trent valley where aerial photography has revealed extensive prehistoric earthworks, including bronze age

ring ditches a few miles from Gotham, at Clifton. The antiquity of this tale is reinforced by the use of the word 'chariot' to describe the King's transport.

Pagan practices

There is ample evidence to show that the majority of the twenty tales, as well as those from the oral traditions, are myths that have sprung from actual pre-Christian practices. The links between the tales and possible tumuli (on Gotham Moor and the Cuckoo Bush mound) place their origin in a remote past. Stapleton collected stories which further illustrate ancient pagan origins. For example, the story of the two brothers and their fight over a phantom celestial herd. This story is identical to an early Irish epic told of two gods. It is extremely unlikely that the old villager who told his tale to Stapleton had read or heard the obscure Irish version. Stapleton himself, a learned and well-read scholar, reported the Gotham tale as unique.

Fools and Wise Men

From first being published under the title of *The merry tales of the mad men of Gotham*, the word 'mad' was quickly dropped

for 'wise'. It is their foolishness that makes the 'mad men' truly 'wise'. One of the published twenty tales makes an appearance in a MS entitled 'The Wickirk Play', written by an unknown hand some time between 1425 and 1450. Here the titles of 'Fools of Gotham' is firmly bestowed on the villagers. Nowhere in the early printed tales is the word 'mad' used. The Gothamites are referred to as 'Fools'.

The folklorist Sanda Billington states that, 'It appears that in England in the Middle Ages the word "fool" was more than the abstract term of abuse which it appears to be today . . .'. The origin of the 'Fool' is deeply rooted within the human mind. The Fool is an archetypal figure who, through his apparent foolishness, possesses wisdom and a state of near-divinity. The true Fool has close links with the shaman; indeed they may be considered one and the same creature. The Divine Fool was the shaman who entered the Otherworld for the benefit of the community.

The Universal Village of Fools

Britain is not unique in having a village (or villages) of Fools. According to Brewer, from ancient times many countries have had their own locale of fools. For ancient Asia Minor it was Phrysia; ancient Thracians counted Abde'ra as their home of fools; to the ancient Greeks it was Boeo'tia; in Germany (at least in the last century) it was Sabia.

There is one ancient home of fools that reveals the true nature of these places. For the ancient Jews the home of Fools was Nazareth. To call someone a Nazarine was to call them a fool. The divine fool who was born at a place known as 'The House of Bread' in a cave sanctuary dedicated to Adonis was referred to as 'the Nazarine'.

Main sources:

Sandra Billington, *The Social History of the Fool*, Harvest Press 1984

J.E. Field, *The Myth of the Pent Cuckoo*, Elliot Stock 1913

A. Stapleton, *All about the Merry Tales of the Wise Men of Gotham*, privately published 1900

Nasrudin loaded his ass with wood for the fire, and instead of sitting in its saddle, sat astride one of the logs. 'Why don't you sit in the saddle?' someone asked. 'What! and add my weight to what the poor animal has to carry? My weight is on the wood, and it is going to stay there.'

The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin
Idries Shah 1966



'The Wearing of the Horns'. A seventeenth century woodcut from a church broadsheet warning of the dangers of infidelity and published at the time of the wars against the Dutch.

Note the goat horns depicted on the man's head. The wearing of horns was linked to the Fool and also with the cuckold husband.

The word 'cuckold' is a direct reference to the cuckoo.



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GOTHAM, Sussex

R.A. STEVENS has published articles and booklets on ghosts and hauntings in Leicestershire and Sussex.



Of course it might be questionable to lay claim to the 'original village of mad people' from Andrew Borde's *Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham* with several counties having villages with the same name. I believe the one in Nottinghamshire is the odds-on favourite. However, recently 'discovered' a place by this name in East Sussex I feel this county should lay claim to this scheme of feigning madness as an early tax-avoidance scheme.

Borde did a lot of his writing at 'The Mint House', Pevensey, East Sussex and this was only twenty-or-so miles from Borde Hill near Cuckfield where he was born. Andrew's brother, Richard, became Vicar of Pevensey in 1520 but, after only a few years in the turbulent times of the Reformation and not wanting to change either his views or add more fuel to the fires of Smithfield, fled from England. He never returned and, when he died, left Andrew a substantial amount of local property. The newly-rich Borde bought 'The Mint House', moved in and carried on with his various careers. One was to write a book on the village of Gotham - the others being a monk, a doctor, an envoy for Thomas Cromwell and even a dubious claim to fame for being the first man to bring rhubarb seeds to Britain!

Looking at a nineteenth century OS map I saw about half-a-dozen miles or so away from Pevensey a place named

'Gotham'. Because this was close to where Borde lived, I thought this might prove interesting. Unfortunately, none of the later maps seemed to have Gotham marked and much of the area has been over-run by the urban sprawl of Hastings, Bexhill and St Leonards. Luckily, the roads on the earlier map seemed to still be there. With visions of finding the whole place covered by some appropriately picturesquely-named ugly housing estate I set out in search of Gotham. Within a short distance from Bexhill the road led out into the country and I found a lane where Gotham was marked.

If Gotham was ever a village [See *Frank Earp's comments - ed.*] there is hardly any trace now except for a modern farm house named 'Gotham Farm' which is only slightly higher ground to the east of the marshes. More research shows it was not mentioned in Domesday Book but was recognised in the twelfth century. I would think that this was one of the many small hamlets

which can be found on the marshes between Pevensey and Hastings but are now only farmhouses.

If Borde wrote, as it seems likely to me, on local places and events then it would be obvious that the Gotham he mentioned would be the one which lay only a few miles from his front door and not in Nottinghamshire or elsewhere. Maybe the dreaded 'Marsh Fever' of the locality might have added to stories of 'mad' villagers?



Two contemporary portraits of Andrew Borde from sixteenth century woodcuts.

EXPLORING

PAST & PLACE

The past is in front of us.

Maori saying

So, according to the inside front cover, *At the Edge* is encumbered with the subtitle (or is it a mission statement?) 'Exploring new interpretations of past and place in archaeology, folklore and mythology'. While not intended to be read as a manifesto, this article attempts to explain this handle and justify why we're here.

Few of today's career-conscious archaeologists would want to justify the theories and interpretations of, say, Glyn Daniels, still less more distant notables such as Gordon Childe. Even within single academic lifetimes it is possible to take disparate broad-views of the subject, as Colin Renfrew has happily shown. By the same criteria the 'fringe' contains a legacy that should largely be disregarded.

The non-academic research which, for want of a better label, surfaced under the epithet 'earth mysteries' may be considered as an essential antidote to the excessive scientism and hard-line 'rationalism' which pervaded academe during the 60s and 70s. The post-modernism of the 80s saw innovative, if somewhat arid, academic adventures into the preconceptions of prehistory, revealing poor theoretical foundations. While the tools of science continue to illuminate once-inaccessible recesses of the archaeological record, in the 90s many once-alternative

interpretations of the past have superceded simplistic understanding.

Yes, the past is now being 'interpreted', some would say 'invented', rather than being 'understood'. Pluralism of approaches has replaced monolithic bigotry. No longer are amateurs left to take the broader views transcending academic pigeon-holing. Myth and folklore are seen as valid (if at times confusing) means of aiding the interpretation of sites. Sites are recognised as part of larger geographical landscapes and landscape archaeology has become a well-recognised sub-discipline. Human lifestyles are seen as being closely connected to the minutiae of the landscape and ecology. The rich variety of human culture revealed by ethnography has begun to persuade prehistorians that they cannot project the preconceptions of Western materialistic minds onto our predecessors.

At the Edge might be thought to be a witty way of aluding to 'fringe' activities. But 'fringe' has negative connotations of unravelled and untidy (despite the fringe often being more

BOB TRUBSHAW cut his editorial teeth by taking over Mercian Mysteries in 1990 and contributed a number of articles and reviews to this and other magazines. He has also researched and written about the holy wells, standing stones and medieval carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland. His current interests in bridging between the best of 'alternative' and academic approaches are reflected in the contents of At the Edge.

interesting than the culturally orthodox, as say at the Edinburgh Festival). The margins in mind are rather those between disciplines. And what happens when there are attempts to build, albeit at times rather perilous, bridges across the chasms? On the basis of recent evidence, ideas emerge which are far more exciting and innovative than we have ever been accustomed to seeing from academe.

With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight we can recognise the pioneers of what now would be regarded as the disciplines of social and landscape archaeology, such as the 1970s and 80s studies of the neolithic on Orkney. Around the same time Andrew Fleming also took an interest in the Dartmoor landscape which was to bring about an innovative understanding of prehistoric field systems [1]. Although scarcely considered of little more than arid intellectual interest at the time, even more fruitful seeds were being sown about five to ten years ago. A series of papers and books, mostly by Hodder, Shanks and Tilley, looked at the lack of

theroretical underpinning to much of what was happening in archaeological interpretation and provided some radical kicks-to-the-consensus [2].

Within a few years these heated theoretic debates had begun to lead on to new looks at sites; more specifically to looking at groups of sites as constituent parts of a larger whole. Peter Ucko and colleagues in their words 'reconsidered' Avebury as a sacred landscape [3]. Dorset came under the spot light quite early, with an important survey of the prehistory of Cranborne Chase which included some open-minded interpretations of the role of the neolithic cursus [4].

At the same time Julian Thomas was rethinking the neolithic and 'reading' monuments as complex architecture, again with an emphasis on examples from Wiltshire [5]. Thomas was perhaps the first academic archaeologist of the latest 'hermeneutic' schools of thought to openly discuss such concepts as 'linear' mounuments, archaeoastronomy and site intervisibility as having spiritual or mythic significance in the neolithic. Perhaps because the 'fringe' had become so accustomed to having such approaches pooch-pooched, nobody (myself included) was expecting such insights within a heavyweight study. It is unfortunate that few 'alternative' archaeologists have recognised the helpful insights which Thomas provides in *Rethinking the Neolithic*. He imaginatively re-interpretes well-known sites such as Avebury and Bryn Celli Ddu (Anglesey) and, by the standards of his peers, writes with reasonable clarity if always with a 'post-graduate' level of reader in mind.

This book is many things to different readers as each of the chapters offer a different 'reading' of the material record of the past. These explore the ways in which our

predecessor's experience and outlook are determined by their routine experience of place, and with the less-routine experience of rituals which may use place in a 'liminal' manner.

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

L.P. Hartley

The first book-length work to convince me that this new thinking was not an academic fad was Richard Bradley's *Altering the Earth* [6]. Combining a broad scope - the subtitle reads 'The origins of monuments in Britain and continental Europe' - with innovative ideas and yet still being entirely readable is a rare achievement. Bradley takes as his starting point the rich megalithic remains of Mid Argyll around Kilmartin. When visiting such an area, Bradley notes 'we are confronted with just how different the past was from the present.' He observes that we tend to create a past in terms that are familiar to us. The main failing of this approach is to overlook the wider significance of place in an unmapped landscape, because we lack the ability to incorporate the unaltered topography into our sense of landscape. This takes Bradley into a topic which he has since developed further, prehistoric rock art. However, the main thrust of *Altering the Landscape* is to show that, in the author's opinion, 'monuments and places worked together to direct and stimulate the experience of prehistoric people.' Bradley's examples included an especially perceptive evaluation of the Cranborne Chase cursus as a monument that not only controlled access but also 'controlled the experience' of associated barrows.

A number of wider issues of looking at prehistoric landscapes emerged all-but-simultaneously in a collection of papers entitled *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* [7]. This broke with the hitherto orthodoxy of giving people a 'hypothetical status' in the landscapes, as unknown (and, it

was implied, all-but-unknown) creators of the material evidence. This meant that population levels, climate, land use and settlement had been the furthest one should venture from hard evidence; even suggestions of 'focal places' became a controversial topic. By contrast, Julian Thomas' contribution [8] dealt further with the Avebury monuments, attempting to recreate the personal experience these sites might have been intended to invoke - he specifically sees them as a series of structures, each to be revealed in turn. In a paper that is generally lucidly written, he concludes concisely: 'Evidently, the intention [at Avebury] was to construct a set of conceptually separate and mutually secluded contexts for action.'

Alongside Thomas' chapter was an architectural approach to Swedish megalithic tombs by arch-phenomenologist, Christopher Tilley, and an attempt by a geographer, Denis Cosgrove, to look at the ways in which landscapes are mythologised. Some of the other papers were more 'political' in perspective, although a separate publication, *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* [9] dealt with the thorny contemporary issues which bring together archaeologists, indigenous peoples and their sacred sites. In the process, these papers demonstrate the variety of ways in which sites are held to be sacred, with informative contributions from as far apart as Arctic Russia, California, Australia and Ireland.

Archaeologists were beginning to drop the rag-bag term 'ritual' (which, anyway, seemed to be allowed only when all possible utilitarian interpretations had been exhausted). Sites could be sacred again. Sites, sacred and otherwise, were being put into the perspective of landscapes. Above all, people were back in the landscapes.

One of the first book-length surveys to embody some innovative assessments of the

siting and functions of sacred sites was Mark Patton's work on neolithic Brittany [10]. Subtitled 'monuments and society', among the surprises within this book is the recognition that decorated menhirs were deliberately reused in later long mounds - one menhir being broken in two and the fragments incorporated in separate mounds. Although not especially accessible to a non-specialist, Patton deals in detail with decorative art in the passage graves such as Gavrinis and even attempts to summarise the social aspects of specific ritual landscapes.

So far, the most detailed and innovative assessment of British neolithic sites has come from Christopher Tilley [11]. Building on the work of other researchers, he has taken various groups of neolithic sites - such as the chamber tombs of Pembrokeshire - and considered their placing in the landscape to be based on intervisibility with specific peaks and hills, such as Carn Ingli. Other sections deal with the Black Mountains in south-east Wales and with Cranborne Chase. Apart from an unfortunate 'academic-speak' title, Tilley has succeeded in adopting a reasonably accessible style with just a few lapses. His ethnographic parallels with hunter-gatherers in Canada and cultivators in Melanesia and south-western USA rank as true inter-disciplinary studies. The overwhelming impression that Tilley creates is that it is possible to discuss, in detail, how the landscapes were perceived by the people of the past.

An entirely different approach, but equally effective in its transcending of disciplines, is Aitchinson's work on the royal centres of medieval Ireland [12]. By looking at the mythological literature and the archaeology 'back-to-back' he is able to destroy some long-held preconceptions and, more

importantly, to offer a number of new insights into the nature and role of places such as Navan and Tara in the prehistoric and early medieval periods.

The neolithic passage tombs of Co Sligo have benefited from Bergh's doctoral study where the emphasis is fully revealed by its title: *Landscape of the Monuments* [13]. Although much of the content is, inevitably, in the nature of a catalogue of surviving remains, he does try to place them within a geographical context, noting their tendency to 'clustering' around key sites. Unlike Patton, he stops short of attempting to create a 'social' framework. I suspect that a number of studies are currently underway which will repeat Patton and Bergh's approaches.

Recent issues of *Antiquity* have included articles which looked at Irish megalithic landscapes from an architect's outlook [14] and which related the rock art in the Boyne Valley passage tombs to 'entoptic' patterns encountered only under trance states [15] - a topic which was once firmly banished to the fringe. At a different level entirely, the difficult issues of neolithic goddesses, Marija Gimbutas and 'New Age' beliefs based on 'old school' archaeology were openly discussed [16].

The past exudes legend

Bernard Malamud

There are a number of areas of 'new thinking' in academic archaeology which are missing from this resumé. The reason is simply that I have yet to get to grips with the key texts. Those who appear to be in the know report that some of the post-modernist French anthropological philosophers are finding interesting things to say about the nature of space and place. At least two of the main texts have appeared in English: *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre and *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé (1995). Alongside this theorising about place are longer-standing studies of the social production of time. This has been linked largely with the Annales school [17] which can be considered to be studying

how history is made and how the past is created.

What is lacking from these resumé is an equivalent opening-up from folklore and mythology. The relevant journals are largely devoted to introspective erudition which offers little to excite non-academic readers. Mythology has produced ground-breaking thinkers, such as Bruce Lincoln [18], but such works have rarely crossed into studies in other disciplines. Only a collection of papers on a wide variety of themes related to liminality [19] has the scope to interest the generalist rather than the specialist.

Towards a sharing of views

According to one sage of the West [20], criticism has to go through these stages:

- It is impossible.
- It is possible, but it is useless.
- It is useful, but I knew about it all the time.

Those of us who have been with 'alternative' archaeology long enough might, I hope, be forgiven for recognising the accuracy of this aphorism. Leslie Grinsell was well aware of the second remark - his work on the folklore linked with prehistoric sites [21] was merely a part of a long lifetime's activities which went against the fashions of the times. Aubrey Burl put people back into Stonehenge as long ago as 1987 [22]. In 1991 Paul Devereux, the long-standing editor of *The Ley Hunter*, was encouraged by Chris Chippindale to share his observations of intervisibility between West Kennet long barrow, Silbury Hill and Windmill Hill with *Antiquity's* readers [23]. The possibilities of a richly symbolic basis for Irish rock art had been pioneered in the early 1980s by Brennan [24]. Ireland's mythological landscapes have been recently thoroughly re-explored by Michael Dames [25] (who had, many years before, provided an inspirational modern-day mythology for Avebury [26]).

Gerry Bracken's observations of spectacular sunset effects at Croagh Patrick have yet to be fully published, however [27].

Now that sufficient academics 'knew about these all the time' we can look forward to some healthy sharing of views. Indeed, a number of academics whose works are cited above have developed effective links with 'alternative' researchers. Intellect free from the straitjacket of scholarly convention and the anxieties of career-building reputation can produce high-calibre work. The common interests were made clear by Paul Devereux at the most recent TLH Moot (London, October 1995) when he noted that thinking about place requires both imagination and theoretical constructs. Place and mind are inextricably linked. This in turn means that place is not passive; rather it interacts with human consciousness. Devereux made the suggestion that prehistory can be considered to be equivalent to the unconscious mind, whereas history is equivalent to the conscious mind. Modern minds, with the mnemonics of maps, photographs as well as written texts, no longer 'need' myths; only traditional societies can still preserve those 'fossils of consciousness' that are embodied in pre-literate cultures.

As Joseph Campbell recognised (drawing upon Carl Jung), dreams are private myths and myths are public dreams. Mythic consciousness is akin to dreaming with the eyes open. In such a mind-state, monuments are like the dreams we try to remember.

The ability of the modern mind to think of 'place' abstractly, rather than as something which is in the mind of the perceiver, has led to savage separations from other physical evidence of the past. The mind is the bridge between past and place. Minds think of place in many ways. We tend to categorise them as various

forms of myth, with an ethnocentricity that separates our own world-view as being, by comparison, 'objective'. It takes little imagination to recognise that modern minds are every bit as redolent with symbolism of place as any ethnographic parallels. Our 'myths' embody notions of ownership, environment, beauty, amenity and the more work-a-day equivalents for the mundane landscapes of industry and suburbia.

Who controls the past controls the future.

George Orwell

There is nothing absolute about our concepts of past and place, rather an effervescent fashionability where the only certainty is change. Yes, once more, we are creating images of other cultures in the image of our own pre-occupations. This time it is change and pluralism which we are projecting on to our predecessors.

Special thanks to Kathryn Denning for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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- 1: *The Dartmoor Reaves*, Batsford c.1987
- 2: *Reading the Past* Ian Hodder, Cambridge UP 1986 (2nd edition 1991); *Reconstructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, Routledge 1987 (2nd edn 1992).
- 3: *Avebury Reconsidered* P. Ucko, M. Hunter, A.J. Clark and A. David, Unwin Hyman 1991
- 4: *Landscape, Monuments and Society: the Prehistory of Cranborne Chase*, John C. Barrett, Richard Bradley and Martin Green, Cambridge UP 1991
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- 6: *Altering the Earth* R. Bradley, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1993
- 7: *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* ed. Barbara Bender, Berg 1993
- 8: 'The politics of vision and the archaeologies of landscape' in Bender, *ibid*.

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Rowan

With the demise of *Mercian Mysteries* at the end of 1995 it might appear that a gap has been left in the earth mysteries coverage in the Midlands. Following discussions in recent months between Bob Trubshaw and myself, we agreed that *White Dragon*

should take up the earth mysteries cause within the Midlands (or Mercia, as it is termed in *White Dragon*, which means everywhere from Manchester to Oxford and from the Welsh Marches to Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire).

I cannot pretend that there will not be changes in the resultant earth mysteries coverage. For those who are not familiar with *White Dragon* let me say quite simply and directly that it is a pagan, witchcraft and occult magazine. Since its launch at Samhain 1993 the magazine has deliberately sought to encourage new writers and artists to 'cut their teeth' and to give them a sympathetic and friendly forum in which to develop their confidence as writers and so, in the longer term, become regular contributors to the pagan and 'alternative' press. More established writers are published *only* if their material has an identifiable relevance to matters Mercian. Consequently, nearly all material and artwork so far published in *White Dragon* has been the work of more general pagan/occult interest with a specific focus on Mercia. Typical of this latter approach was the general article on sheela-na-gigs in Britain and Ireland by Jack Roberts, a long-standing resident of south-west Ireland, published at Lughnasa 1995 and highlighting examples of sheelas in Mercia for readers who wished to visit a local example.

- 9: *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* ed. D.L. Carmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves and A. Schanche, Routledge 1994
- 10: *Statements in Stone - Monuments and Society in Neolithic Brittany* Mark Patton, Routledge 1993
- 11: *A Phenomenology of Landscape - Places, Paths and Monuments* Christopher Tilley, Berg 1994
- 12: *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland* N.B. Aitchison, Cruithne 1994
- 13: *Landscape of the Monuments - a Study of the Passage Tombs in the Cúil Irra Region, Co. Sligo, Ireland* Stefan Bergh Riksantikvarieämbetet, Arkeologiska undersökningar, Skrifter Nr 6, 1995
- 14: 'Forms of power: dimensions of an Irish megalithic landscape', Jean McMann *Antiquity* No.68 (1994) p525-44
- 15: 'Subjective vision and the source of Irish megalithic art', Jeremy Dronfield, *Antiquity*, No.264 Vol.69 (1995) p539-49
- 16: 'Goddesses, Gimbutas and "New Age" archaeology', Lynn Meskell, *Antiquity* No.262 Vol.69 (1995) p74-86
- 17: Summarised in *The Annales School and Archaeology*, ed. John Nintliff, Leicester UP 1994
- 18: His early work, *Emerging*

- from the Chrysalis: Studies of Rituals of Women's Initiation* (Harvard UP 1981) contains an introduction relevant to all studies of ritual; see also *Myth, Cosmos and Society - Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction*, Harvard UP 1986; *Death, War and Sacrifice*, University of Chicago Press 1991
- 19: *Boundaries and Thresholds* ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, Thimble 1993
- 20: Attributed to Idries Shah.
- 21: *Folklore of Prehistoric Sites in Britain*, L.V. Grinsell, David and Charles 1976
- 22: *The Stonehenge People* H.A.W. Burl, Dent 1987
- 23: 'Three-dimensional aspects of apparent relationships between selected natural and artificial features within the topography of the Avebury complex', P. Devereux, *Antiquity* Vol.65 (1991) p894-8
- 24: *The Stars and the Stones*, Martin Brennan, Thames and Hudson 1983.
- 25: *Mythic Ireland*, M. Dames, Thames and Hudson 1992
- 26: *The Silbury Treasure* Thames and Hudson 1976; *The Avebury Cycle* Thames and Hudson 1977
- 27: Bracken gave an illustrated lecture at the *Northern Earth* magazine moot in Bradford, October 1994; a brief account appears as 'The magic of the rolling Mayo sun', Michael Viney, *Northern Earth*, No.63 (1995) p6-9

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white Dragon keeps EM alive in Midlands

The editor of White Dragon introduces herself with typical gusto and attitude.

I am more than aware that the mere mention of the words 'pagan, witchcraft and occult' will be enough to ensure that some will read no further and turn the page. I am equally aware that minds do not always meet between the pagan and earth mysteries communities and that there is at least some mutual antagonism. I venture to suggest, however, that such might be a mistake. While more than aware that much of what passes today for paganism (like many branches of what has been included under the earth mysteries umbrella over the years) is frankly cranky and downright dodgy, I suggest that this reflects the approach of some of the persons involved rather than being a problem with paganism *per se*. After all, the earth mysteries community has not exactly been free of the freaky and frantic in the past!

Apart from anything else, I am not your average dolphin-channelling, chakra-wanking, crystal-shagging neo-pagan. I have had an active interest in archaeology and astronomy for almost thirty years, geology for some ten years and did Folk Lore Studies (including the survivals of pre-industrial and oral culture, folk traditions and beliefs) as part of my degree course. I necessarily take an open-minded and broadly 'alternative' approach to these fields. My feet are firmly on *terra firma*, though as a pagan I have strong interest in the point where science meets spirituality. I therefore hope to blend the scientific and the spiritual, the critical and

esoteric - and the need for both rigorous research and a personal response to the sacred landscape.

Over the coming year or so I hope to increase the earth mysteries content within *White Dragon* and, while *White Dragon* will not be a dedicated earth mysteries magazine in the way that *Mercian Mysteries* was, I aim to publish *at least* one substantial earth mysteries-based article per issue. However, the amount of space allocated to earth mysteries matters in future can and will grow as the amount of material submitted and reader interest grows. To that end, I invite readers of *At the Edge* and especially former contributors to *Mercian Mysteries* to submit articles or ideas for articles of *Mercian interest* for future publication. In so doing, I hope to continue the policy which *White Dragon* has followed since its inception, i.e. that material published must be either written

by persons living and/or working in Mercia, or by 'foreigners' providing that their material has a significant focus on Mercian sites or on matters of Mercian interest.

Without your support, a Midlands-focused earth mysteries coverage will die. With your support it can continue. For anyone interested in seeing *White Dragon*, a single copy is available for £1.75 or a four-issue subscription is £6.00 (cheques payable to 'Paganlink Mercia'). If you have articles or ideas, please contact me at:

103 Abbotswood Close
Winyates Green
Redditch
Worcestershire
B98 0QF

or telephone 01527 516771

Footnote from Bob Trubshaw

I am very pleased that Rowan has taken the opportunity to fill the gap left by the demise of Mercian Mysteries. White Dragon sets an exceptionally high standard for 'regional' pagan magazines, both in content and appearance. I would especially recommend White Dragon to those readers of At the Edge who have been long-standing readers of Mercian Mysteries and miss the diary pages of local events and other Midlands minutiae. White Dragon has always included a detailed listing of Mercian events and groups. Rowan will receive full support from myself in promoting awareness of earth mysteries in the Midlands.

Plea for help!

Rowan would be particularly interested if there is a 'keen and knowledgeable' archaeologist who would be willing to keep her informed of developments and discoveries of interest and relevance to pagans, especially sites threatened by road and other developments in the Mercian area.

Ancient Taplow

During the hot summer of 1995 an exciting discovery was made when the parched grass revealed the plan of a now-demolished church which once sat in close proximity to a pagan Anglo-Saxon burial mound at Taplow, Buckinghamshire (175:SU906823). The observation was made by David Went, of English Heritage, and with the help of an English Heritage inspector, David Stocker, they measured the parch marks. These revealed details that were not compatible with illustrations of the medieval church. What had showed up was indicative of an early Anglo-Saxon church, with small side chapels, or porticos) and a possible apse at the end of the chancel. These foundations could date from around 700, making it one of the earliest churches in the country.

Taeppa's mound

Taplow derives its name from the Old English *Taeppa*, a personal name, and *hlaw*, denoting a mound, which refers to the the great Anglo-Saxon burial mound still to be seen in the grounds of Taplow Court Estate. Taplow Court house and the surrounding estate stand at the top of Berry Hill which overlooks the River Thames. The name 'Berry' originates from 'bury', meaning a fortified place, which no doubt refers to the iron age earthworks enclosing the area in which the mound is situated, but which are barely visible nowadays.

Taeppa's burial mound is 15

ERIC L. FITCH researched the local history of Taplow during the mid-1980s, which culminated in his book Unknown Taplow (Windsor Publications 1988). Subsequently he turned his attention to the folklore of the Windsor Great Forest and wrote In Search of Herne the Hunter (Capall Bann 1994).

feet high, 80 feet in diameter, 240 feet in circumference and stands in the grounds of the churchyard which contained the original Taplow church, which was demolished in the last century. The churchyard survives within the grounds of Taplow Court Estate and is still owned by the Church of England. In 1883 James Rutland, a local antiquary, decided to excavate the mound, which proved to be the richest Anglo-Saxon burial discovered, only to be surpassed by Sutton Hoo many years later. The initial cuttings into the mound produced merely earth and gravel together with various flints, worked bone, animal bones and pieces of pottery. Eventually the excavators dug to a depth of five feet below the mound's base where they found the grave of Taeppa himself.

Of his body all that remained were fragments of a thigh bone and vertebrae. The grave area was 12 feet by 8 feet with a floor of fine gravel and the chamber had been constructed of wood. The grave goods were the highlights of the excavation and included:

- a gold buckle, four inches long and four ounces in weight
- a pair of gilt bronze clasps
- remains of six drinking horns with gilt silver mounts and terminals
- four glass 'claw' beakers

- bone gaming pieces
- a gold fringe, originally attached to a garment
- an iron sword, three spear heads, two shield bosses and a knife
- a bronze Coptic bowl
- a large bronze-lined cauldron
- two wooden buckets with decorated bronze rim bands
- two crescent-shaped bronze ornaments, thought to be part of a harp.

The wealth discovered indicates that the person buried beneath the mound was a man of considerable status. The grave's contents point to a date of around AD 620, roughly contemporary with Sutton Hoo. We can surmise that Taeppa was a local chieftain and it has been suggested that he was a relative of King Raedwald of East Anglia (who was possibly buried at Sutton Hoo) and that the king installed him in south Buckinghamshire to hold off the West Saxons.

At the time Taeppa was interred, the Anglo-Saxons practised both inhumation and cremation, cemeteries being the norm for the ordinary person and barrows reserved for the nobility. There is scant literary evidence for pagan burial practices, Anglo-Saxon literature not coming in to its own until the Christian era. The rites which were enacted at the time of Taeppa's burial are difficult to



ascertain but some idea can be gleaned from the funeral ceremonies that took place after the death of Beowulf, the hero of the great Old English poem.

Although Beowulf himself was cremated on a grand funeral pyre adorned with shields and helmets, his ashes were afterwards placed in a tumulus erected in a high position, as at Taplow, which was visible from a great distance. In the barrow was placed a great treasure of gold along with the ashes, and the whole was enclosed in a fine



Finds from the Anglo-Saxon burial at Taplow.

vault. This completed, twelve chieftains rode around the barrow, reciting an elegy and speaking of their heroic king. Perhaps Beowulf's soul then entered the abode of Woden - Valhalla - where warriors feasted in a great hall and indulged in ever-lasting battle. This may well be the scenario which surrounded Taepa's death and burial - which was soon to disappear for good with the arrival of St Birinus at Taplow.

However, even after the arrival of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons were superstitious people, revering trees and wells, using charms and incantations and believing in supernatural beings such as elves and dragons - both of whom were thought to inhabit mounds. There is a village in Derbyshire called Drakelow, meaning 'dragon's mound' and the dragon was a favourite motif in Anglo-Saxon artwork, the Sutton Hoo shield having one featured as decoration. *Beowulf* contains the tale of a dragon who guarded buried treasure within an ancient tumulus. This is an example of the awe in which burial mounds were held and the mysteries and legends attaching to them. It is also indicative of treasure lying hidden inside such mounds and the idea that they should not be disturbed.

An iron sword was found in the grave, confirming the exalted status of Taepa, since the sword was mainly the weapon of the nobility. The standard of workmanship for such weapons and their scabbards was invariably extremely high, the importance of the smith being shown by the reverence shown to the mythological figure of Wayland the Smith. Swords were regarded as being imbued with magical power and their possession indicated wealth and position. Some even had names, such as Beowulf's, which was called Naegling. Such was the importance of these weapons that the narrative of Beowulf's terrible fight with the dragon



was interrupted by a description of Naegling's history. Sometimes magic inscriptions were written on the sword in runes. One excavated in Kent was inscribed with the runic letter 'tir' and this probably indicates the first letter of the war-god Tiw and represents an invocation to the god. Unfortunately, Taeppa's sword was too rusted for any detail to be discerned.

Taeppa's mound has provided us with a fascinating story and a wealth of objects to study. The barrow itself is well worth visiting and has probably been attracting attention ever since it was constructed. Such an edifice was often a meeting place and it is known that the Anglo-Saxons used barrows for their moots. They were often built some distance away from habitation sites, and that they were held in awe as places of sanctity is shown by the story of St Guthlac. This holy man wished to live a life of solitude and he discovered a remote island in the fens of East Anglia. There he found a large tumulus which had a hole in one side following earlier tomb robbing, and here he built a dwelling.

The Anglo-Saxon burial mound at Taplow, summer 1995.
Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.

However, legend has it that he had to fend off terrible spirits and this story offers another example of supernatural beings inhabiting burial mounds.

Seemingly the tradition among the Anglo-Saxons for building barrows was restricted to the seventh century. Taeppa's mound, dating as it does to about 620, fits this well and is probably a relic of one of the last official pagan rites to have taken place in this locality, for about twenty years later St Birinus was on the scene, preaching about a different god.

Bapsey Pond

Another feature of the Taplow Court Estate is a once-sacred pool, called Bapsey Pond. Legend has it that about 642 St Birinus converted to local pagan Anglo-Saxons by baptising them in the waters of Bapsey Pond. The name 'Bapsey' appears on the oldest maps of the area and is a contraction of the word 'baptism' but it is likely that the pond itself has

been revered since the earliest of times.

Today Bapsey Pond lies a couple of hundred yards down Berry Hill from Taeppa's mound and is a pond, not very large, surrounded by small trees and foliage (896823). It is set in a layer of clay and the depression which forms the shape of the pond is continually filled from a spring situated in the gravel layer above. Originally the spring would have been seen to flow out of the ground near the site of the old church at the top of the hill, but it was culverted in the early nineteenth century and now runs underground.

St Augustine is attributed as the first missionary to England in 597 but his mission did not have the hoped-for far-reaching effects and when Penda, the pagan King of Mercia, defeated and slew the recently-converted King Edwin of Northumbria in 633, Pope Honorius decided that another mission was called for. Birinus was the man chosen for the job and he was sent as a

free agent. So we find him crossing the English Channel but, before he reached our shores, a remarkable event occurred. He was accustomed to carry the holy sacrament wrapped in a linen cloth and hanging from his neck. On this occasion he accidentally left it at the port and, descending from the ship to the sea, he walked upon the water back to the port, picked up the sacrament and re-embarked without a drop of water upon his person. Not surprisingly, after this miraculous feat, he made a number of converts on board!

Birinus died in 649-50 and was buried at Dorchester upon Thames. There is an interesting story concerning his death. It is said that he died as a result of an adder's bite while he was in the Chiltern woods and that thereafter no adder could live within the sound of Dorchester's church bells.

In the missionary days of St Augustine and St Birinus the aim was to eradicate paganism. Early in St Augustine's ministry, in 601, a letter from Pope Gregory to the Bishop of London, Mellitus, exhorted him not to destroy the heathen temples and idols but to adapt them, sprinkling them with holy water and installing altars and holy relics. In the case of springs and wells, their water was adapted for baptismal purposes. This scenario matches the Taplow situation well, as here we have a church (although no longer extant) standing next to a pagan burial mound and near a sacred pool.

It is easy to imagine this early missionary standing on the great pagan mound of Taeppa, preaching to the forgathered local inhabitants. The site will already have been holy to them, although without Christian connotations, and perhaps this familiarity made it easier for St Birinus to lead them down to Bapsey Pond and to baptise those willing to be converted to the Faith. This must have seemed strange to some, since the interment of Taeppa was still within living memory.

The witches' revenge

This is not the end of Bapsey Pond's story, however. In the early nineteenth century Taplow Court was purchased by the Grenfell family, at which time the adjacent church had become little more than a ruin. The Grenfells decided to enlarge their estate to take in the old churchyard and so had the remains of the church demolished and a new one built in the village centre. At this time the spring rising from near the church which fed Bapsey Pool was culverted and the pond itself lined with brick.

Local tradition has it that the local witches were not at all pleased with these alterations and cursed the Grenfell family, decreeing that the ownership of the estate would never descend from father to son. Not only was the family generally considered by the locals to be ill-omened, but history has borne out the notion in that the three sons of William Henry Grenfell, Lord Desborough, were all killed before their time. Julian and Billy, both scholars, poets and sportsmen, who would doubtless have risen to eminent positions had they lived, both died at Ypres during the First World War. The third son was killed in a car accident in 1926.

The witches' concern with the Grenfells' activities was probably instigated by the fate of the spring rather than that of the church. It would have been considered a desecration to culvert the spring with its sacred waters, and such an act would have to be paid for by the family who perpetrated the deed. Possibly the spring was dedicated by the witches to Anu, since wells and springs were often dedicated to her. Their names were later Christianised to the more acceptable St Anne. There is a Queen Anne's House opposite the entrance to Taplow Court.

A final link with the local witches may be through the

sacred yew tree. In common with most churchyards, where yew trees were planted as a protection against storms raised by witches, yews grew at Taplow Court. Indeed, a large yew tree stood on Taeppa's mound itself until it was blown down in a storm just before the mound was excavated in 1883.

Notes

Taplow Court Estate is privately owned by the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist sect, but there is a public right of way through the drive to the old churchyard where the mound is situated. The churchyard is an atmospheric spot, the mound being surrounded by ancient tombs and gravestones, including that of James Rutland.

The path leading past Bapsey Pond, however, is on private property and permission must be obtained to visit the pond. Taplow Court house and grounds are open on selected days during the summer, when Bapsey Pond can be visited. The house contains a mural showing the history of Taplow, including St Birinus, as well as a full-size model reconstruction of Taeppa in his mound surrounded by his grave goods.

The treasures of Taeppa's mound are on display in the British Museum, London (Early Medieval Room) in two cabinets adjacent to the Sutton Hoo displays.

This article has been adapted from the author's book *Unknown Taplow* (Windsor Publications 1988).

Thanks to Michael Farley, Buckinghamshire County Archaeologist, for information on the recent parch marks.



FOGS brings stones out of the mist

Friends of Grampian Stones (FOGS) is a charity initiated in 1989 to rescue some of Aberdeenshire's unique neolithic stone circles and Pictish symbol stones from careless farming methods and sedentary bureaucracy. It has succeeded remarkably well in an area known for the influence of the oil boom and the resultant overspend on roads, sodium glare street lighting, new housing and so-called industrial estates.

In 1989, Grampian Region had 4% of its ancient monuments of national importance scheduled under protection of the Secretary of State for Scotland (what was HBM). Now, as Historic Scotland (HS) it still only lists 4.1% of Grampian's ancient monuments, but FOGS have succeeded in providing lists of another 20% of sites whose relevance to the nation is clearly defined. Under a technicality, HS is empowered only to protect actively if a monument is on the scheduled list. So FOGS acts as liaison in the evangelising department. Work continues through the society's 'Red Alert' system, in bringing to the attention of authorities the need for care when operating in the vicinity of a monument (scheduled or unscheduled).

For example, Grampian Regional Council (GRC) Roads Department, while building the Inverurie extension to the A96 dual carriageway bypass in 1991, was apparently unaware of the existence of the 1500-year old Pictish symbol

stone with 'horseshoe' (lost), river symbol and mirror and comb symbols, forming a gatepost at Drimnies farm on the old A96. As operations continued on the new A96 overhead, equipment gradually piled up next to the stone. It is remarkable that until GRC Roads engineers were alerted by FOGS, none of the electricians, drainage experts or roadlayers had noticed it. Thereafter, it was given wide berth. Round one to FOGS.

In conjunction with the society's energetic education programme, FOGS Adopt-a-circle and Adopt-a-stone project has attracted a number of small community groups, school children and other initiatives. The Bullhide Stone at Glenkindie, Donside, nine miles from historic Kildrummy Castle of Earl of Mar fame, was restored in the winter of 1993 after a series of harsh frosts and cattle rubbing had loosened it from its socket. It is the last remnant of a recumbent stone circle whose members had been recorded as 'sledged across the snow' a century earlier until the farmer-owned dropped dead from a heart attack (thereby confirming the belief that to move the stones was to spell disaster!) The sole element of a circle thus preserved had a persistent legend of treasure

buried a bull's hide under one of the stones, so the schoolchildren were determined to find it and at the same time restore the stone to its upright position. FOGS, with the assistance of committee member Ian Shepherd, who is happily also Regional Archaeologist, obliged by excavating the socket to its bottom layer of carefully-embedded pebbles, planning, photographing and drawing each one, but finding no treasure. The with tractor-technology the three-metre bullhide stone was levered back into place, apparently happy to be re-socketed, judging from the resounding thunk as its tooth-like root found its familiar bed. Most positive outcome to the exercise is that the children in this remote valley - and therefore most of the farming families - now consider the Bullhide 'their' stone and are proud of it.

While not strictly in a lithic connection, FOGS has members actively interested in linguistic clues to its heritage and recently rapped local authorities (including the local office of the Ordnance Survey) over the bureaucratic knuckles for allowing modern spellings and etymological errors to creep into the culture: major road signage had conveniently described a 3000-year old recumbent stone

circle as East Aquhorthies, instead of remembering the local penchant for the use of 'Easter'. As the society felt a major effort had been displayed in getting the 'aquhorthies' bit right (Gaelic *achadh* = field; *corthie* = prayer stones), the plea to replace east with easter was phrased gently and politely, and lo! and behold, had some effect. A full list of preferred ancient usage was subsequently accepted and promises given to incorporate wherever possible. Round two to FOGS.

FOGS has from the outset had a good relationship with University of Aberdeen's Department of Continuing Education, and each winter the Department provides at least two speakers to talk to outlying communities on prehistory, archaeo-astronomy and legendary lore as part of the Department's programme. The group's own events and outings are spread far and wide (Grampian is half the size of Switzerland) and several schools benefit from the chance to look at pictures of stones and hear the stories. This is one of FOGS's greatest pleasures and has resulted in an educational

teaching package for north-east schools - an area traditionally taught only English history and culture.

The group's annual get-together takes the form of a family kite-flying picnic, at a different site of antiquity each year. It is perhaps significant that FOGS were asked at Spring equinox 1995 to provide support (visual numbers, complete with kite-flying children from Insch Primary School, who are honorary members) for Grampian's Tourism organisation (wait for it - Grampian Highlands and Aberdeen Tourism Marketing Company). The tourism event was held to promote a new stones trial, *The stone circle*, in the central Aberdeenshire valley of the Don and its tributaries, Gordon District, which by 1996 will be re-absorbed into 'Aberdeenshire'. As a television event it was spectacular and caused much comment. However, this may have been due to GHA's foresight in asking television's Dr Who, Peter Davison, to 'open' the circle!

On a serious note, FOGS's sub-groups initiate their own research into astronomical alignments; magnetic anomalies;

dowsing; psychic restoration and protection; as well as 'established' pastimes of field-walking, recording and registering finds with *Discovery and excavation* (CSA). A flat fee of £10 per annum includes family membership, while institutions pay a higher rate, for use of services of volunteer speakers. This includes an introductory package, winter lecture schedule, invitations to special events and a quarterly newsletter. It presupposes that members will provide input of their own special abilities to help the cause.

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ABSTRACTS

Prehistoric rock art - sacred knowledge?

Richard Bradley's extensive surveys of British prehistoric rock art lead him to conclude that the abstract motifs used may have been chosen 'because their meanings were never meant to be disclosed to the casual observer'. He notes 'that they were the work of a society in which sacred knowledge was important'. Above all, such rocks are re-used in later megalithic monuments, clearly indicating sustained importance.

Richard Bradley, 'Making sense of prehistoric rock art', *British Archaeology* No.9 Nov 1995, p8-9

'Entoptic patterns' in Irish passage graves

Statistical analysis of the motifs carved in Irish megalithic tombs shows a strong correlation with motifs created by non-Western cultures during 'altered states of consciousness' (drug-induced or otherwise). The author concludes that Irish

passage-tomb art is associated with such visions.

Jeremy Dronfield 'Subjective vision and the source of Irish megalithic art', *Antiquity* Vol.69 No.264 September 1995 p539-49

La Hougue Bie

Recent archaeological investigation of this well-preserved and exceptionally large passage-grave on Jersey revealed possible evidence for opium or cannabis resin in pots from secondary burials around passage grave. An interim excavation report indicates that the site was used extensively from c.4060BC and underwent a series of structural modifications until perhaps 2800BC, with the site remaining in use even after the structure was 'abandoned'. Nevertheless, perhaps it is only coincidental that the mound is now surmounted by two medieval chapels.

Mark Patton, 'New light on Atlantic seaboard passage-grave chronology' *Antiquity* Vol.69 No.264 September 1995 p582-6

'Better than 1976'

The initial verdict from archaeological aerial photographers is that the drought of 1995 has revealed more previously-unknown sites than even in the record year of 1976. Unrecorded Neolithic barrows have been spotted in Lincolnshire and Wessex and a causewayed camp near

Peterborough. Iron age remains seem to have been especially prolific, with a dozen barrows near Andover and numerous settlements throughout England. Interestingly, neolithic cursuses, previously thought to be unique to Britain, have turned up in Germany and Hungary.

'Best year ever for air photography', *British Archaeology* No.9, October 1995 p5 and 'Aerial reconnaissance in England, summer 1995', *Antiquity* Vol. 69 No.266 (1995) p981-8

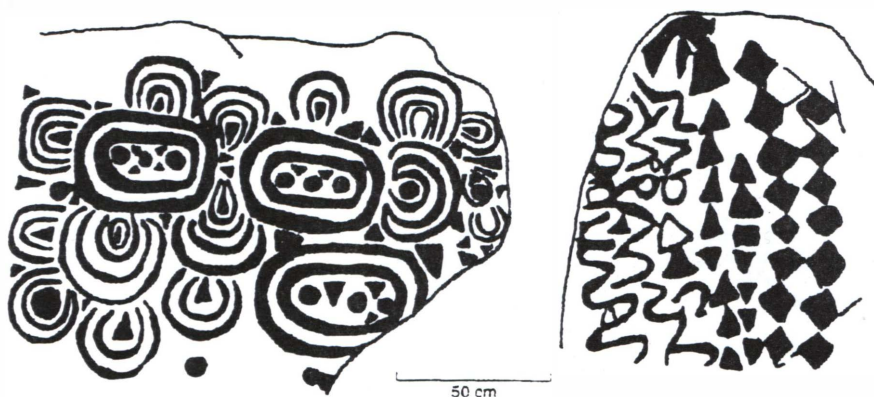
Stonehenge threat resumes

The DTp's Highways Agency unilaterally abandoned an agreement set up in July 1994 by transport minister Steven Norris for the Highways Agency, English Heritage and the National Trust to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the re-routing of roads around Stonehenge. Once again the World Heritage site is threatened by proposals for three alternative routes - all of which would archaeologically damaging. The DTp seems to be unmovable in its intentions to construct a six-lane highway through Britain's most impressive prehistoric landscape. Latest news is that EH/NT/HA have reconvened to recommend a road tunnel as the only solution but there is pessimism that the Treasury will turn this down on grounds of cost!

Peter Addyman 'The road that could ruin Stonehenge' *British Archaeology* No.9, October 1995 p11 and Simon Denison 'Stonehenge roads' *British Archaeology* No.10, December 1995 p4

Stonehenge and Preseli

The debate over the origin of the 'blue stones' at Stonehenge has boiled up again. Those who argue that they are not glacial erratics but man-moved from the Preseli mountains are making much of the discovery of similar-looking stones in the sea



See 'Entoptic patterns in Irish passage graves'

near Milford Haven. Divers plan to bring substantial fragments of the rock to the surface.

Nick Nutall 'Seabed boulders may solve Stonehenge riddle' *The Times* 28th November 1995 [cutting kindly submitted by John Michell.] See also 'Chlorine-36 dating and the bluestones of Stonehenge' *Antiquity* Vol.69 No.266 (1995) p1019-20 for a discussion of previous attempts to confirm a man-assisted journey from Wales.

Pembrokeshire dolmens

The chamber tombs of Pembrokeshire form an interesting subject for study and their location can be considered to be significant. This study takes a serious if occasionally naive approach (handicapped by the omission of full bibliographical details) but seems to have been carried out before publication of Christopher Tilley's *A phenomenology of landscape* (Berg 1994) which adds other alternatives.

George Children and George Nash, 'Sacred stone, death and the landscape', *3rd Stone* No.22 October 1995 p9-11

Flag Fen 'copied' in Sussex

A large bronze age ceremonial and occupation site is emerging from waterlogged deposits near Eastbourne. There are general similarities with the famous site at Flag Fen, although this site seems to be later (800-600 BC). High-status imported bronze artifacts and human burials are among the finds.

'New Flag Fen-like site found in East Sussex' *British Archaeology* No.10 December 1995 p4

Bronze age 'housing estate'

Over 40 neatly laid-out bronze age houses have been excavated from a waterlogged site near Reading - and the site

may reveal up to a 100 such structures. A substantial quantity of burnt stones indicates frequent use of a 'sauna'. Preservation of wooden artifacts and environmental evidence means that many new insights into bronze age lifestyles should be revealed.

Rajeev Syal 'Bronze Age "Barratt" village found', *The Sunday Times* 3rd December 1995 [cutting kindly submitted by David Taylor.]

Mayan cosmology

An ambitious new look at the religion and mythology of the central American Maya people attempts to recreate their traditional cosmology. Controversial in its anecdotal, 'self-aware' style and in its content, key arguments include suggestions that Maya kings were shamans and that the Milky Way was seen as both the World Tree and the Cosmic Monster.

David Freidel, Linda Scheie and Joy Parker; *Maya Cosmos* (William Morrow, N.Y. 1994); see also review feature in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* Vol.5 No.1 (1995) p115-37

Black dogs in Coventry

A gamut of place-names suggest that relatively recent reports of a phantom black dog in the Whitmoor Park area of Coventry may be the latest in a long history of such sightings.

David McGrory 'On the sniff', *Fortean Times* No.83, October 1995, p42-3

Horse whisperers' secrets

Much mystique has been built up around the 'Toad Men' or 'Horseman's Word'. But the 'whispering' may have been a conjuring 'decoy' and the real trick may have involved the smell of dead moles and a blend of herbs.

Peter Bayliss 'Horse scents', *Fortean Times* No.83, October 1995, p39-40

Alien abductions abnegated

'Gross intellectual sloppiness' is the accusation made against Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs and John Mack - the three best-known exponents of the 'alien abductions industry'. This article leaves little doubt that they may have fooled themselves but the evidence they offer should not fool anyone else. Some first-rate writing about little-understood mental processes.

Peter Brookesmith 'Do aliens dream of Jacobs' sheep?' *Fortean Times* No.83, October 1995, p22-30

Population centre of Britain

Readers of *Mercian Mysteries* will be familiar with the editor's obsession with 'omphali' and sacred central places. However, there is a secular counterpart. The 'centre of gravity' of the population has been studied for the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and this reveals a steady drift southwards during this century. In 1901 Rodeley in Derbyshire could claim the honour of fulfilling the role of centre of population. Subsequently the drift has brought it southwards through Longford, Egginton and Swadlincote. Today it teeters on the Leicestershire border, at Overseal. The authors of the study attribute the 16 mile drift to Conservative policies and EU membership.

Geoffrey Lean 'The heart of Britain is slipping south' *Independent on Sunday* 26th November 1995 [cutting kindly submitted by John Michell] and 'Centre stage for village' *Burton Mail* 27th November 1995 [cutting kindly submitted by Chris Fletcher].

Fertility folklore

Procreation has long been of foremost interest to humans and surfaces in folklore, especially that associated with

specific stones and natural seats. A thorough survey of the subject with a number of surprising insights.

Jeremy Harte 'To be a joyful mother of children', *Northern Earth* No.64 December 1995 p7-13

King Arthur's grave 'found'

Based on suppositions in *King Arthur - the True Story* (G. Phillips and M. Keatman, Century 1992) the authors persuaded TV's *Schofield's Quest* to finance both a geophysical survey and a dowser to explore the The Berth near Baschurch in Shropshire. The dowser claimed to locate eight graves.

Schofield's Quest 12th and 19th November 1995 [thanks to David Taylor and Pat Bradford]

'New' Irish cursuses

Cursuses have been 'appearing' in unexpected places in recent years. Two have been identified in Ireland. A reinterpretation of part of the iron age earthworks at Tara suggests it is a 'reuse' of a neolithic cursus. Other fieldwork provides clear evidence for a cursus in the rich prehistoric landscape of Loughcrew.

Tom Condit 'Avenues for research' and Conor Newman 'A cursus at Loughcrew, Co. Meath' in *Archaeology Ireland* No.34 Winter 1995 p16-21

Addresses for periodicals cited (excluding newspapers).

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Thanks to all who have sent letters of support and encouragement to the editor - your kind thoughts are always most appreciated.

Letters of information or comment are welcome for publication in future issues of *At the Edge* although please note that the editor reserves the right to only use extracts from longer correspondence.

As a small incentive, we offer a free issue of *At the Edge* for every letter published.

Help!

Would all readers please help with the compilation of the 'Abstracts' section by keeping their eyes open for interesting information in daily papers and obscure scientific journals. I do not have the time to read a daily or Sunday paper, still less spot the occasional gem in unlikely sources. Your help will, of course, be greatly acknowledged.



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REVIEWS R

James Rattue THE LIVING STREAM

Holy wells in historical context

The Boydell Press 1995
243 x 150mm, 183 pages
Hardback £25

This book is unquestionably one of the best to have been published in English on the well cult, or hydrolatry, as the author describes it, for some time. *The Living Stream* is a solid piece of work, excellently researched and fully referenced. Moreover, it is readable and manages to steer clear of the fantasy mongering and mythology which is characteristic of all too much writing on the subject.

The author concurs with Francis Jones who, in his book *The Holy Wells of Wales* (University of Wales Press, 1954 - recently republished in paperback), argues that the well cult had its roots in religion, reproducing Jones's comment: 'It cannot be stressed too often that everything related (Jones uses the word 'relating') to wells, whether in early form or in mangled survival, traces to one source - religion', though Rattue modifies this to suggest the root is: 'the religious symbolism of water'.

Whether religious symbolism was the genesis of hydrolatry is a moot point, particularly as we do not know what pre-literate

ancient peoples actually thought about natural springs. Possibly it was phenomena associated with water which gave rise to the supernaturalistic element. This can be illustrated through reference to an ancient society in which water played a crucial role, Egypt. The importance of the Nile to life in the country was recognised from the pre-dynastic era onwards, but the name given to it was *itrw*, meaning 'the river', which has no religious connotations. However, the Egyptians knew nothing of the natural processes which gave rise to the annual inundation of the Nile so explained it through reference to the activities of a deity called Hapy.

The Living Stream consists of a general introduction and nine interrelated chapters which together trace the history of the well cult in England from prehistoric times until the present day, the last chapter including a critical evaluation of contemporary neo-pagan, wiccan and 'new age' views and theories about wells and their lore.

The author does not discuss in any detail the claims for wells and springs being able to cure all manner of illnesses, usually through the supposed intervention, at least in medieval times, of various saints, as he says this aspect of the subject has been adequately covered by other writers. This allows him to devote his 183 pages to matters more in keeping with the general historical thrust of his narrative. As well as the historical data this also incorporates interesting, and in some instances novel, ideas regarding the distribution of wells; the difficulties and possibilities arising from place and field name studies in so far as these have a bearing on hydrolatry, and in a more historical vein, the evolution of Celtic and Roman ecclesiastical attitudes to pagan sacred wells and the

extent to which these were christianised. The conclusions the author draws, albeit cautiously and qualified, following this analysis, which also covers the question of churches built on pagan sites, challenges many commonly held ideas as to the extent to which this happened. Considerable attention is also given to what folklore records show about the well cult, this data also being treated with praiseworthy caution by the author.

The impact of the Reformation on the medieval well cult is considered in some detail as it brought in its wake some dramatic changes. The author noting that while iconoclastic activity was considerable, worship at a number of wells continued, though presumably this must also be seen as indicative of the value the worshippers placed upon what they believed to be healing wells. Although several writers on wells have argued that following the Reformation many became secular spas, the author contends this was not so as only fourteen can be shown to have 'degenerated from holy wells'. This claim is questionable.

The Living Stream, then, constitutes a rich assemblage of information and ideas. The scope of the well cult was, indeed is, extensive, which makes for difficulties in categorisation and so probably explains the author's reluctance to define what he means by terms such as 'holy well'.

Named wells and springs played an important part in the social and cultural life of communities throughout England, as to some extent they still do in parts of Ireland and Brittany. Unfortunately in the past all too many antiquarians appear to have been indifferent to well lore, a situation not so different amongst contemporary local historians, as they like to be known, thus even now it is still being lost. Perhaps, then, this

book, which meets academic criteria, will alert them to what they are ignoring before it is too late.

The book is rounded off with a seven page, double-columned index of English wells, a somewhat inadequate general index and a valuable twenty-three page bibliography. However, it is difficult to understand why Bob Trubshaw's *Holy Wells and Springs of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1990) is excluded while the author's own 1993 itinerary of named wells in Leicestershire is present. There are other omissions, one being Val Shepherd's, *Historic Wells in and around Bradford* (1994).

Robert Morrell

Philip Heselton

EARTH MYSTERIES

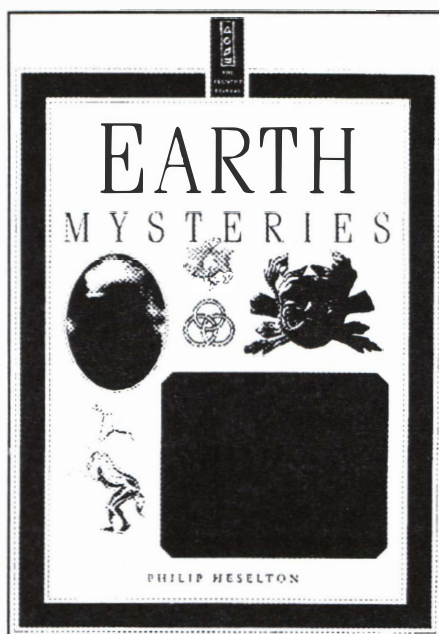
Element 1995

A4, 112 pages, full colour throughout

Paperback £9.99

Philip Heselton can be considered to be one of the founding fathers of earth mysteries. Quite appropriately, Element asked him to write *The Elements of Earth Mysteries* in 1991 as part of a generally successful series of low-cost paperbacks. This latest publication retains the original text but incorporates a substantial number of colour illustrations into an attractive large-format presentation.

John Michell's *View Over Atlantis* (Thames and Hudson 1969) was a major inspiration for what was to emerge as the earth mysteries 'movement'. Paul Screeton's *Quicksilver Heritage* (Thorsons 1974) subsequently defined the scope of topics brought together under the umbrella of earth mysteries. However, in subsequent years approaches diversified and no useful introductory book was written. Heselton's concise yet balanced viewpoint, combined with generally fruitful



illustrations, means that *Earth Mysteries* fulfils in an attractive manner that need for an introductory work.

Heselton fully recognises that key to earth mysteries is the sense of 'spirit of place', an awareness of sacredness which, using his terminology, might best be thought of as 'poetic geography'. But, above all, his sane and level-headed approach inspires the reader to get out and experience the countryside around them.

Those familiar with the activities within earth mysteries may consider that the key participants have, on the one hand, become increasingly diverse in their approaches

while, at the same time, becoming almost overtaken by increasingly open-minded approaches from more academic practitioners. *Earth mysteries* might, therefore, also become a historic document, reviewing about 30 years of 'fringe' exploration at a time when professional approaches to the past had become excessively materialistic.

Bob Trubshaw

Arthur Versluis

NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONS

Element 1995

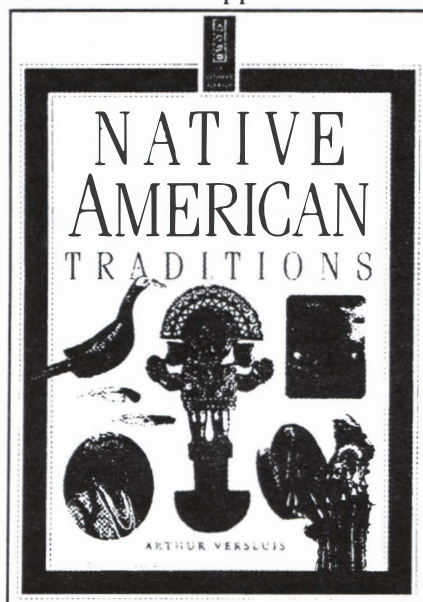
A4, 96 pages, full colour throughout

Paperback £9.99

This is a companion volume to Heselton's *Earth Mysteries* and serves to confirm how well Heselton coped with the limitations of covering a large subject in limited words. By contrast, Versluis's book flits frustratingly from topic to topic, tending to give too many specific examples. The overall effect seems patchy and rarely seems to provide a satisfactory overview.

Although dealing primarily with north American indians, every now and again Versluis seems to remember that there are also traditional peoples in southern America. Rather than devote his precious allocation of words to giving further clarification of the diversity of approaches within the Americas, on several occasions the author instead throws in a short comparison with non-American peoples and their customs.

So in the chapter on shamanism, for instance, he gives a page of introduction, nearly two pages of text on north American shamanism and about the same again on south American shamanism. Another



half page of text claims to draw parallels with shamanism worldwide. Allowing for photographs this totals seven pages. With the tersest writing possible, this is inevitably superficial. In practice, Versluis's use of specific details from his sources means that this reader felt not such much that he had the benefit of a panoramic view but rather of looking at the subject down the wrong end of a telescope.

Perhaps it really is asking too much to effectively summarise such a wide-ranging subject in about 30,000 words of text. On the positive side, the book is attractively produced and generally accessible for the novice.

Bob Trubshaw

Philip Heselton SECRET PLACES OF THE GODDESS

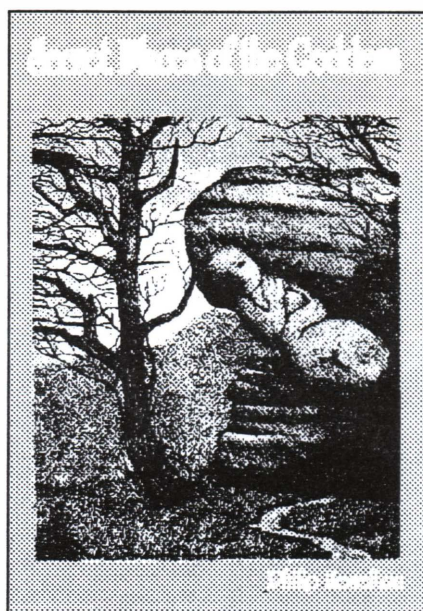
Capall Bann 1995

A5, 208 pages, 17 full-page
photographs

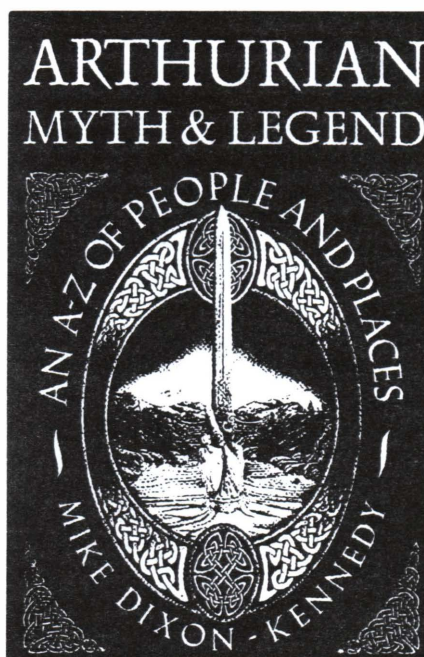
Paperback £10.95

An entirely new book from Heselton, which picks up on aspects introduced in *Earth Mysteries* but develops them into fully rounded-out approaches. Seeking and finding special secret places in our surroundings seems an almost archetypal human trait. Heselton contends that children are born with the innate ability to respond in this way, but our upbringing means that we are brought up as 'townies' (even if some are lucky enough to be living in relatively rural surroundings) and lose this capability.

Secret Places of the Goddess is an 'instruction book', a 'work book', for re-establishing our ability to respond to place and environment. Although essentially a very personal approach, based on what amounts to a lifetime's experience and reflection,



Heselton is happy to link his approaches with aspects of modern-day paganism. His usage of the term 'paganism' is an individual way of looking beyond the diversity of specific approaches to an underlying unity. As such, Heselton's paganism seems almost detached and abstract. To a large extent, he is extending Quaker principles from a Christian framework into a wider spirituality. Heselton also recognises that this also connects with Taoist principles, especially the need for direct experience. Indeed, in the



introductory chapter he writes 'I shouldn't be writing a book at all but, as a wise teacher once said, should be taking you by the hand and walking with you through the nearest wood.'

I happened to read this book at the commencement of a week's holiday amid the inspirational landscape of Pembrokeshire. I can confirm that *Secret Places of the Goddess* stimulated my own abilities to respond to the spirits of place beyond the normal limitations of a book, even if not quite manifesting as a friendly guiding hand. This is one 'pagan' book which deserves to be read by a much wider readership.

Bob Trubshaw

Mike Dixon-Kennedy ARTHURIAN MYTH AND LEGEND

Blandford 1995

242x152mm, 298 pages.

hardback £16.99

The following reviews in this issue of *At the Edge* may lead readers to think that Blandford consider there to be a vast market for books on Arthurian myths. Whether this is true or not, this quantity of output risks overlooking two first-class contributions to the field. I had hoped that a much better Arthurian scholar than myself would provide more informed reviews of Mike Dixon-Kennedy's book and John Matthew's *The Unknown Arthur*. However, at a critical stage in the deadlines, he was called into hospital for an uncomfortable operation so, regrettably, your over-worked editor appears to hog the reviews section.

Arthurian Myth and Legend is an encyclopedia which runs from Aalardin to Zitrus. These entries themselves betray one of the strengths of this compendium - a comprehensiveness

which extends beyond the core figures and locations. Indeed the publishers claim that there are over 2000 entries. Nevertheless, unlike many dictionaries, the entries are not so terse as to be dry. Instead one can dip into this book and find meaty morsels on most pages. Anyone fairly new to Arthurian mythology will benefit enormously from this breadth and depth of information. Those with good knowledge will still find much of the detail informative and relish the excellent cross-referencing.

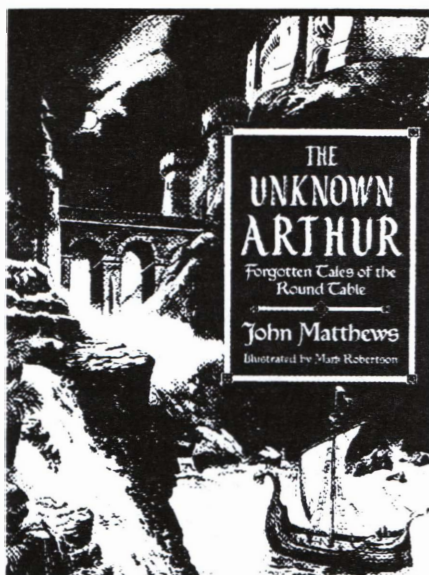
This is one Arthurian book which genuinely contributes to the greater understanding of Arthurian literature. If I may be forgiven admitting to one wishful thought that is simply the hope that one day such detailed information will form the basis of an Arthurian CD-ROM, backed up by full texts and all-but-limitless illustrations!

Bob Trubshaw

John Matthews THE UNKNOWN ARTHUR

Blandford 1995
253x196mm, 160 pages,
colour illustrations, hardback
£17.99

Those whose interests in Arthurian mythology extend beyond the basic tales of Lancelot, Gawain, Merlin and the derring-do of the Round Table knights will enjoy John Matthews' latest offering. *The Unknown Arthur* is neither an erudite edition of medieval texts or a hurried pot-boiler from an over-worked author. Instead Matthews has drawn upon his extensive knowledge of the more obscure 'backwaters' of Arthurian lore and crafted modern prose versions of little-known legends. He claims not to have 'improved' on the originals by



rationalising the plots - even though they may seem rather bizarre.

Matthews recognises that the recurrent theme in these tales is some kind of warfare with the Otherworld. Whenever the king or one of his knights leaves the safety of Camelot or another castle then the Otherworld awaits him. Even if the heroes stay at home, Otherworldly beings are liable to gatecrash and offer games, quests or challenges which none of the brave knights can refuse without loss of face.

The stories are indeed most readable although I cannot comment on the accuracy of Matthews' reworkings. While such matters are very much of personal taste, for me the over-literal 'kiddies picture book' illustrations by Mark Robertson distract from the appeal of this book. In all other respects this is a first-class book and should help to widen the range of Arthurian tales which are well-known and loved.

Two books by John Matthews previously only available in hardback have been recently reissued as paperbacks:

Merlin Through the Ages
R.J. Stewart and John Matthews
(eds) Blandford £9.99
King Arthur and the Grail Quest
John Matthews
Blandford £9.99

Bob Trubshaw

John Matthews and Michael J. Stead KING ARTHUR'S BRITAIN

A photographic
odyssey

Blandford 1995
276 x 219mm, 160 pages, 100
colour photographs, hardback
£20.00

If 'coffee table books' have become cliché then perhaps this offering is more of a 'bedside table book'. It is a large-format collection of stunning colour photographs supported with informative if fairly brief text. Assuming the reader has a basic knowledge of Arthurian myths then the brevity of the text is not a problem, sufficing simply to remind the reader of the links between the places photographed and key events in the tales.

Clearly, one could be justifiably sceptical of the claims for any of the sites to be linked with the diffuse geography of the Arthurian literature. Instead, the places chosen by Matthews and Stead provide the justification for publishing some highly effective photographs. The most 'basic' of the illustrations are well-lit and the best of them combine well-crafted composition with outstanding natural light.

This book will remain on my bedside table for some time yet - a browse through the evocative images combined with the reminders of rich mythology is an excellent way of unwinding at the close of day and inducing a meditative frame of mind which drifts into sleep. If I have a small gripe it is simply that, as well as the better-known sites such as Tintagel, there are a number of little-known sites but no precise information on their location to help any readers

who want to experience the places first-hand. Incorporating OS grid references into the index of places would have been a worthwhile exercise.

Bob Trubshaw

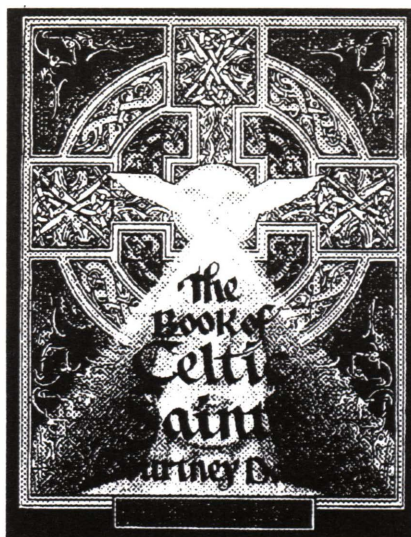
Courtney Davis THE BOOK OF CELTIC SAINTS

Text by Elaine Gill
Blandford 1995
285 x 227mm, 128 pages,
full-colour illustrations
throughout, hardback £18.99

Few people can have missed the 'Celtic' artwork of Courtney Davis in recent years. Although much-imitated, Davis was the pioneer of modern-day 'Celtic' artwork. But this is not only a collection of interlace borders and initial letters inter-twined with stylised animals. The main images are representational although, when not rather too Romantic, verge on the mandala-like. The all-pervasive wide coloured borders make the pages too 'busy' for the main images to stand out and this detracts greatly from what otherwise might have been an ideal book for 'meditative' contemplation.

The illustrations are supported by Gill's text which provides a concise and reasonably sound introduction to the sixteen saints who are honoured by inclusion, although a number of other books provide similar facts and fables while covering a much greater number of saints. For once, the motifs used in the illustrations are broadly contemporary with the subject matter. Although generically termed 'Celtic' artwork, it is more than a tad confusing that the stylistic devices owe much more to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art of the early middle ages than to the La Tenè or Hallstatt styles of the iron age Celtic heartland.

Undoubtedly this book includes some of Davis's better



offerings in recent years and, from the autobiographical remarks in the introduction, perhaps the start of a new and richer phase in his creative output.

Bob Trubshaw

Allen Watkins ALFRED WATKINS OF HEREFORD

Garnstone 1972
223 x 145 mm, 48 pages
plus 6 photographs, hardback
Limited edition of 325
signed copies

Not a seriously-belated review but just a note for readers that a small number of unsold copies of this limited edition, signed by the late author, have come to light. It is an informative biography of the author of *The Old Straight Track* by his only son. It deals as much with Alfred Watkin's inventive activities in flour milling, bread making and photographic exposure meters as with the infamous leys.

Available for £7.00 plus 75p p&p from J. Michell, c/o 11 Powis Gardens, London, W11 1JG (cheques to J. Michell)

Books received:

The Living World of Faery
R.J. Stewart
Gothic Image 1995 £11.95

Working with Dreams
Lyn Webster Wilde
Blandford 1995 £7.99

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